



SENTENCE ERRORS IN DESCRIPTIVE TEXT: A STUDY ON HOW STUDENTS UNDERSTAND ENGLISH SENTENCE PATTERNS

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ABSTRACT

This research is addressed to discover the mistakes carried out by the students in writing simple sentences and complex sentences of descriptive text in the form of description paragraph. The research participants are undergraduate students of the first semester. The research objective is identifying kinds of sentence errors in simple sentences and complex sentences conducted by the students in writing a descriptive paragraph. The research data were obtained from the results of the questionnaires. The data tells that, firstly, 96% of total students did not come from a language major when they were in high school y are and tests given; secondly, 63% of students learn English in one week more than once (generally 2x80 minutes), and thirdly, only 29% of students admit to having studied very 'complex' sentences. Furthermore, the study identifies three types of students' mistakes related to writing simple sentences. Those mistakes are: 1) mistakes in using the verb form from the review of the English structure and of conformity to the subject of the sentence, 2) the use of types of words in the subject and or *subject complement*, and 3) the incompleteness of elements in simple sentences (no *subject*, or *verbs*, and or *subject complement*). In relation to the ability of writing complex sentences, there were four types of common mistakes related to complex sentences. They are: 1) mistakes in placing complementary clauses according to the type of clause, 2) incomplete sentence elements, both in the main clause and in complementary clauses, 3) mistakes in using types of words in certain parts, both in the main and complementary clauses, and 4) mistakes in using conjunctions. Based on the research results, the researcher concludes that the ability to write complex sentences should be of greater concern both students and lecturers for better writing ability.

Keywords : sentence errors, simple sentences, complex sentences, descriptive text

INTRODUCTION

Mastery of sentence structure in English is very important, hence the students can write a paragraph well. The sentence structure is simply intended as an arrangement of words

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in such a way as to contain ideas that the reader can understand. Datchuk proposes the term sentence construction to show similar idea (Datchuk, 2015). He emphasizes that sentence construction can be defined as the sequencing of syntactically correct words into a variety of sentence types understandable to readers, including simple, compound, and complex sentence types. He continues that proficient sentence construction allows students to precisely express information, such as on short answer responses, and promotes continued acquisition of closely related writing skills. So, mastery of sentence structure means understanding how sentences are formed, so that the sentences fulfill their proper requirements in constructing the meaning of a particular text.

The sentences are basically arranged by the words order. Understanding the concept of words becomes something important. Hirtle (2017, p. 19) tries to reinstate on his book that the word is the *sine qua non*, the atom, of every act of speech. He adds that only by splitting the atom, by analyzing the word to obtain an understanding of its mental makeup, can a linguist explain the syntax of usage in a sentence. The concept of a word means talking about the type, position, meaning, change, and choice of words. Bhatta in his book says that words convey the meanings. He adds that, however, for words to convey the meanings, the listener (or reader) of the words must recognize that the words he listens to serve as linguistic expressions of the objects or notions he likes to be conveyed. That is to say that the listener (or reader) must understand that the words serve as an indication of certain objects, notions etc. he wants to convey. Once the listener understands the fact that the words serve as the linguistic expressions of certain objects, notions etc., the words become the means of communication (Bhatta, 1991, p. 21). Understanding the concept of the word can help the students construct the sentences correctly in expressing their ideas in writing.

Understanding the concept of word and sentence is beginning step to understand the concept of paragraph. Paragraph is a collection of sentences containing the author's complete thoughts. Many writers share the same idea on this part. Robert a quoted by Alexandra-Valeria Popescu et al. say that a paragraph is "a part of a written text in prose which is characterized by a certain unity of thinking and of composition" (Alexandra-Valeria Popescu et al, 2015, pp. 1213 – 1217). Butler on her book says very simple statement that a paragraph is a group of sentences (Butler, 2016, p.4). In short, because paragraph consists of sentences, and sentences consist of words, so we can come to an agreement that it is very important to understand word and sentences writing rules.

In this relation, paragraph may exist in several names, such as descriptive paragraph, argumentative paragraph, and so on. The descriptive paragraph is a paragraph that only contains information in the form of a description or description. Asmayanti and Ardi state that descriptive writing (or paragraph) is a common way to present details and in the impression of a person, a place, and an object to the readers (Asmayanti and Ardi, 2017, p. 55). Apart from this context, even Juzwiak classifies paragraph into academic paragraph and popular paragraph. Academic paragraphs are commonly found in textbooks, college essays, and scholarly journals. Academic paragraphs encourage readers to slow down and reflect on the ideas being discussed. Meanwhile, popular paragraphs are commonly found in newspapers, magazines, Web sites, and personal communication, such as e-mails. Popular paragraphs allow readers to move quickly, grabbing key pieces of information as they go (Juzwiak, 2012, p. 4).

The phenomenon that exists regarding to the mastery of English sentence structures associated with the ability to write descriptive paragraphs actually shows things that are not as expected. Researchers find that the mastery of concept on sentence structure among

students is very low. Though specifically about the usage of Discourse Markers in sentences, the study by Sabry and Khaled. indicates that the PYP EFL learners' use of writing DMs is too limited. (Sabry and Khaled, 2013, p. 221). Because of this limitation, they believe that this affects the quality of the students' compositions. Muluneh and Tegbar on their article also states that EFL teachers teaching basic writing skills course to freshman students at Ambo University complain that their students are weak in writing an effective paragraph. This problem is clearly observed in other courses which require assignments and examinations in written English. There is also a consensus among teachers that paragraph writing skills remain poor even if students are instructed how to write it. Researchers assume that the weaknesses of students are due to the students' experience in learning English. Majority of students have never learned specifically about writing.

The researchers are interested in finding out what kinds of the sentence errors in English sentence patterns that are found in a descriptive paragraph.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Meaning of Sentence

Most linguists have tried to define the meanings of sentence. First, Teschner and Eston (2007: p1) state that written sentences are meaningful which begin with capital letters and end with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark. Meanwhile, Verspoor and Sauter (2000: 30) state that the term of sentence comes from the Latin ' *sententia* ' means feeling or opinion. He added that in terms of grammar, sentences are expressions that show feelings or opinions. In addition, a sentence is a collection of expressions that have their own meaning in which there are words or groups of words that indicate a statement, question, command, hope, or affirmation which begins with capital letters and ends with a period, question mark, and exclamation mark. In addition, the sentence also consists of at least one complete meaning using at least one subject and one predicate.

Classification of Sentence Patterns

In general, sentences can be grouped into four types (Steffani, 2007: 45), namely:

- a) *Simple sentence*; that is, sentences that contain only one clause which can stand alone and usually have a subject and predicate, for example: 1) *The snow melts*; here we have one subject (*The snow*) and one predicate (*melts*), 2) *The snow melts quickly*; here we have one subject (*The snow*) and one predicate (*melts quickly*). In line with Steffani, when a sentence contains only one subject and one verb (predicate), then the sentence is called a simple sentence (Altenberg and Vago, 2010: 207; Radford, 2009a: 8; Radford, 2009b: 479).
- b) *Compound sentences*; sentences that have two or more independent clauses that are combined with *coordinating conjunctions* (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*), for example: *You did an excellent job, and you deserve good pay*; here we have two clauses (*You did an excellent job* and *you deserve good pay*), and the two clauses are combined with '*and*'.
- c) *Complex sentence*; a sentence that has one clause that can stand alone and two or more clauses that cannot stand alone, and they are connected with a *subordinating conjunction* (*when, although, because, etc.*), as in: *When you are sick, you need rest*; here we have two clauses (*you are sick* and *you need rest*), and the two clauses are combined with '*when*'

- d) *Compound complex sentences*, sentences that contain two or more independent clauses connected with *coordinating conjunctions* and or *subordinating conjunctions*, as in: 1) *When I saw her, she was dancing because she had won the prize*; here we have three clauses (*I saw her, she was dancing, and she had won the prize*), and those three clauses are connected with 'when' and 'because', and 2) *They could not believe that he was there, but Nancy said he was*; here we have four clauses (*They could not believe, he was here, Nancy said, and he was*), and they are all connected with 'that' and 'but'.

Meanwhile, in terms of the types of *verb*, the English sentence has at least 5 patterns (Verspoor and Sauter, 2003). They are:

- a) *The running pattern (intransitive verb)*; a sentence pattern consisting of: Subject + Predicate + (can be added) Description or S + P + (A), for example: John (S) is running (P) fast (A)
- b) *The being pattern (copula verb)*; a sentence pattern consisting of: Subject + Predicate + Adverb for Subject + (may be added) Adverb or S + P + SA + (A), for example: John (S) is (P) fast (SA) in the game (A)
- c) *The doing/seeing pattern (monotransitive verbs)*; a sentence pattern consisting of Subject + Predicate + Direct object or S + P + DO + (A), for example: John (S) kicked (P) the ball (DO) when it was thrown by Peter (A)
- d) *The giving/buying pattern (transitive verbs)*; a sentence pattern consisting of Subject + Predicate + Indirect object + Direct object + (may be added) Description, or S + P + IO + DO + (A), for example: John (S) gave (P) Peter (IO) the ball (DO) for his birthday (A)
- e) *The making/considering pattern (complete-transitive verbs)*; a sentence pattern similar to sentence pattern number 3 except that the possible verb can be used only slightly, for example: *They made John the umpire*.

Furthermore, in relation to the meaning of clause, Verspoor and Sauter mention that a clause is 'included' in a sentence. Therefore, it also shows a complete meaning that is equipped with a subject and predicate. They add that a clause is divided into two types, namely: 1) *independent clause*; a clause that can contain its own message without being coupled with other parts (clauses) in a sentence, and 2) *dependent clause*; a clause that cannot stand alone or a clause that must be coupled with other parts (clauses) in a sentence in order to show a complete and clear message.

Meanwhile, in terms of its function, clauses in English sentences can be grouped into:

- a) *Noun Clause*; a clause that functions to replace noun in a sentence (Eastwood, 2002), so that it can function as a sentence subject and or sentence object (see also Azar, 1999).
- b) *Adjective Clause*; a clause that serves to explain an object in a sentence. Because it describes objects, this clause serves as a substitute for an adjective. This clause usually begins with a *relative pronoun* (Lynch and Anderson, 2013).
- c) *Adverbial Clause*; a clause that functions as an explanation for a (usually) verb. In other words, this clause serves as an *adverb* or *annotator*. The position of this clause is not fixed or can be anywhere (Dumais, 1988, and Farberman, 1985).

METHOD

This research approach is qualitative, which means that the research is carried out by qualitative research data, methods, and steps. Williamson, Lisa, and Paul state that qualitative data analysis involves sorting and categorizing field notes and interview transcripts in a systematic way (Williamson, Lisa, and Paul, 2018). They emphasize that qualitative data analysis is the way that researchers make sense of the data they have collected in order to communicate their findings to others. In accordance to this statement, we chose the research respondent all students who studied in English department in Universitas Darma Persada..

In the very beginning, the researchers design a questionnaire and test. The questionnaire is aimed at obtaining data about the background of the respondents regarding to their English language skills in general and writing sentences in English in particular. Meanwhile, the test is designed to get the data about the errors on the sentences that students make on their writing. This data is expected to illustrate the students' abilities and mistakes in writing sentences, as well as writing descriptive paragraphs. The results of the questionnaires and tests are displayed in tabulations and then analyzed to draw deductive conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding on Students' Background

The data of the students' background were taken from the questionnaire. This data shows several facts that are used to make assumptions related to student abilities according to the topics discussed. The first fact shows that 96% of total students did not come from a language major when they were in high school. This percentage figure raises the assumption that in general students who become respondents do not have many opportunities to learn English, so they do not have high abilities related to the topics discussed. Furthermore, the second fact shows that 63% of students learn English in one week more than once (generally 2x80 minutes). This figure shows the assumption that students have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge and skills in English, but this figure seems to still need further analysis (because, although studying more than once a week, the proportion of language skills taught also needs to be analyzed) . It seems that this assumption is supported by the third fact as follows: only 29% of students admit to having studied very 'complex' sentences. This figure raises the assumption that 71% of students have never 'known' or 'mastered' the concept of more difficult sentence patterns. This fact is in contrast to the fourth fact which shows that 79% of students have learned simple sentences before. The assumption of this figure is that students have no difficulty in understanding and making simple sentences. Finally, the fifth fact shows that only 25% of students have studied specifically about descriptive paragraphs. This figure concludes that students do not know and master how to write a description paragraph.

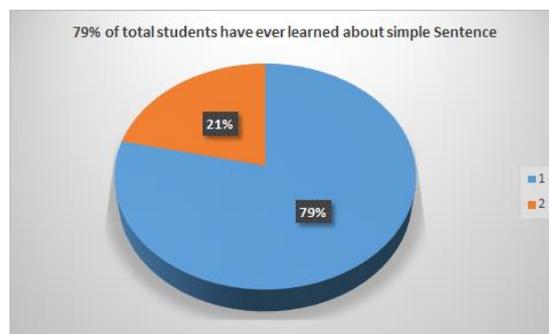


Figure 1. Percentage of Students who have ever learned about simple Sentence

Errors in Writing Simple and Non Simple Sentences

Accumulatively, 79% of students are able to make simple sentences correctly. This figure shows that, in general, students master the concept of simple sentences and they are able to make simple sentences. This seems to be in line with the fact about

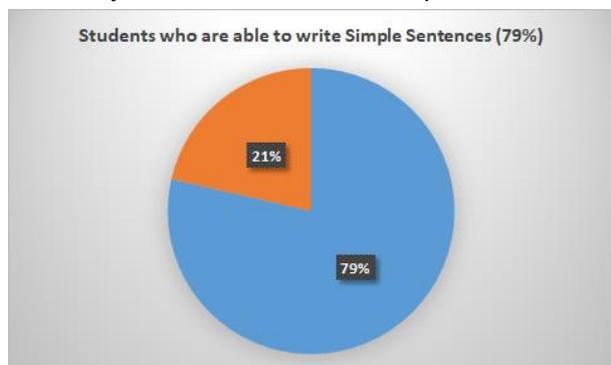


Figure 2. Percentage of Students who are able to write simple sentences

students' background above which shows that (also) 79% have learned about simple sentences. Furthermore, from the percentage of students who have not mastered (able to make) simple sentences correctly and correctly, this study found the fact that there were 3 main mistakes made by students, i.e.: 1) mistakes in using the verb form from the review of the English structure and of conformity to the subject of the sentence. This mistake occupies the largest position (58% of the total students who have not mastered the concept), 2) the use of types of words in the subject and or *subject complement* (25%), and 3) the incompleteness of elements in simple sentences (no *subject*, or *verbs*, and or *subject complement*) by 17%.

Furthermore, regarding to sentences which are not simple, only 38% of students were able to make those more complex sentence patterns (with 4 different forms) properly and correctly. This seems to be in line with the fact that only 29% of students have learned complex sentences before. The mistakes that arise from students when writing complex sentences are divided into 4 main mistakes, as follow: 1) mistakes in placing complementary clauses according to the type of clause (43%), 2) incomplete sentence elements, both in the main clause and in complementary clauses (28%), 3) mistakes in using types of words in certain parts, both in the main and complementary clauses (23%), and 4) mistakes in using conjunctions

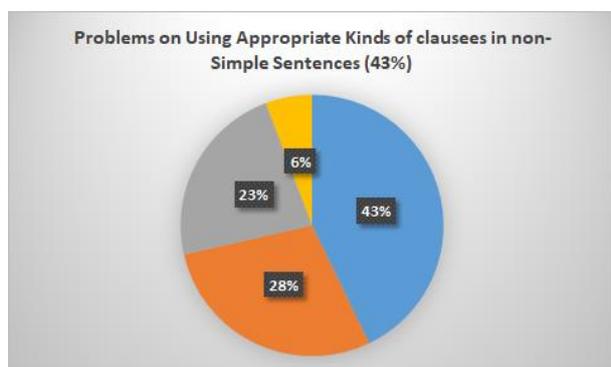


Figure 3. Percentage of Students' Problems in Writing Non-Simple Sentences

(6%).

The following table contains some examples of errors found in writing complex sentences.

1. Errors of patterns in complement clauses according to clause type
a. I am thinking about it when I lost my cat
b. I like rabbit which fun to play with them
c. They have a black hair which the colors I like
d. What are they talking about is make me laugh
e. From now on, how she will grow is depend on me
f. I like it, because when I play basketball make me fun
g. This series that me and my sister watch when she comes home

h. Dona who always make me up in the morning, it doesn't matter
i. I love my cat what I love my mother to, for the first time she lost
j. Now, I'm thinking about how can my father found this fluffy cats
2. Mistakes in using types of words in certain parts, either in the main clause or in the complement clause
a. Although the cat bite me, I am still love my cat
b. Today I came to collage after I studying at college
c. When my cat was finished his food, he was a sleep
d. My cats are gift from God when I turned 18 last year
e. I like my cat, and we are spend time together at home
f. He plays as a point guardm and me plays as a point guard too
g. Wherever Charlotte sleep, I always play with his paw and brush his fur
3. Incomplete sentence elements, both in the main and complementary clauses
a. Every day I watch Perbukers for it so funny
b. After from animal doctor she take a rest....
c. Because too many children who scare it they are see a dog...
d. My father puts them on the case and I open it every morning
4. Misuse of conjunctions
a. Yuki is a perfect pet who I was looking for
b. I bought him from the pet shop that my aunty's worked in there
c. Now, I am thinking about I will present the gift's for everyone who find my cat

Table 1. Examples of Errors in Sentence Complexes

In term of paragraph writing, from the implementation of the test, 80% of the students were able to make a description paragraph in accordance with the requirements of the good paragraph. Even so, research also shows that there are 2 weaknesses of students in writing descriptive paragraph, namely: 1) unclear use of punctuation marks (82%) and 2) non-synchronization between one sentence and another (18%).

Discussion on Errors

The discussion is based on the errors in writing as described in the Table 1. The table shows that there are 4 kinds of errors in students' writing. They are: 1) Errors of patterns in complement clauses according to clause type, 2) Mistakes in using types of words in certain parts, either in the main clause or in the complement clause, 3) Incomplete sentence elements, both in the main and complementary clauses, and 4) Misuse of conjunctions.

The error of patterns in complement clauses according to clause type is about how students make grammatical mistakes in clauses in complex sentences. As discussed earlier, *complex sentence* is a sentence that has one clause that can stand alone and two or more clauses that cannot stand alone, and they are connected with a *subordinating conjunction* (*when, although, because, etc.*) (Steffani, 2007: 45). Now, let us see the first 3 examples of mistaken sentences. Sentence 1 is 'I am thinking about it **when I lost my cat**'.

This sentence requires *noun clause* (*when I lost my cat*) after prepositional verb phrase (*thinking about*). So, the combination of *it + when I lost my cat* is totally wrong. Sentence 2 is 'I like rabbit **which fun to play with them**'. This sentence requires *verb* after *which*. The best *verb* is *be verb*'. Secondly, the word '*them*' at the end of the sentence makes awkward message. So, *them* is deleted. Sentence 3 is '*They have a black hair which the colors I like*'. This sentence is very confusing because it consists of two point or messages, i.e.: *They have black hair* and *I like black (color)*. The problem is the Sentence 3 makes the two messages unclear. So, the solution for this is to rewrite the sentence into two separated ones, like: (1) They have black hair, and (2) I like black.

Next discussion is about mistakes in using types of words in certain parts, either in the main clause or in the complement clause. Types of words are about organ of speech, such as verb, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Each of this organ of speech must be appropriately written. In the following discussion, we can find mistakes in especially 'verb'. In sentence 'Although the cat bite* me, I am* still love my cat', the 'verb 'bite' is wrong since it needs singular form of verb. Secondly, the verb 'love' cannot join 'am'. The sentence is supposed to be 'Although the cat bites me, I still love my cat'. Next, in the sentence 'Today I came to collage after I **studying*** at college', the verb 'studying' is supposed to be 'studied' as the sentence requires past verb form to match with 'came' in the independent clause. Last, in the sentence 'My cats are gift from God when I turned 18 last year', the verb be 'are' is misused with 'were' as the sentence requires past form of be. Furthermore, 'gift' is supposed to be 'gifts' to make it plural meaning.

Related to the third category of error; incomplete sentence elements, both in the main and complementary clauses, here are the discussions. First, in the sentence 'Every day I watch Perbukers* for it* so funny', we need 'comma' before 'for' as 'for' is 'coordinating conjunction' that connects two clauses. Furthermore, the clause 'for it so funny' is a mistake as it needs verb after subject 'it'. Second, the sentence 'After from animal doctor she take a rest', needs to be edited into 'After she went to see a vet, she took a rest'. This means that the clause 'After from animal doctor' is not in correct pattern as it does not have subject and it needs to have comma. Meanwhile, the clause 'she take a rest' is supposed to be contextually in past form.

Finally, the fourth category of error is 'misuse of conjunctions'. As in the sentence 'Yuki is a perfect pet *who* I was looking for', the conjunction 'who' is an error. The correct conjunction is supposed to be 'that' or 'which' since it connects a pet (not human). Meanwhile, the other sentence, 'Now, I am thinking about I will present the gift's for everyone who find my cat', seems to lack of conjunction. After 'about', the sentence needs 'noun clause' with conjunction before subject 'I', and the best conjunction is 'what'. So, the best correction for the sentence is 'Now, I am thinking *about what* I will present for everyone who has found my cat'.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Most of the respondents are able to make simple sentences in English properly and correctly according to English grammar. This finding is supported by questionnaire data which shows that most of the respondents had learned the concept and writing of simple sentences in English before taking the *Descriptive Writing* course. Most of the respondents are not able to make complex sentences in English properly and correctly (in various types of clauses in complex sentences). This finding is also supported by questionnaire data which illustrates that

most respondents have never learned complex sentences before. Most of the respondents are able to make a description paragraph properly and correctly according to 2 good paragraph writing rules.

Based on the above conclusions, the authors submit the following suggestions: (a) Respondents must be trained to reinforce the concept of verbs in simple sentences, (b) Respondents must also be trained to add vocabulary to various types of words (objects, properties, work, and descriptions), (c) Respondents must be trained again to understand each type of clause in complex sentences, and (d) Paragraphs of description that have been mastered are further developed into various types of paragraphs, for example paragraphs on processes or descriptions.

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