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## Students' grammatical problems in writing essay at English Education Department of Halu Oleo University

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### ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate grammatical mistakes and grammatical problems faced by students in writing essays at the English Education Department of Halu Oleo University in the year 2017. This research used a descriptive qualitative design. The respondents of this research were the students of the Writing III Class of the English Education Department of Halu Oleo University which consisted of 10 students of 41 students. The researcher used purposive sampling in selecting participants as a sample. The instrument of this study was students' writing essays to collect the data. In analyzing the data, the researcher used qualitative data analysis based on several steps, namely identifying, evaluating, interviewing, and concluding. The results of the study showed that the students had some mistakes in learning grammar. There were 217 total mistakes done by students in writing essays and those mistakes raised some problems. The problems faced by students in writing essays were subject-verb agreement, tenses, prepositions, and pronouns. The grammar problems were caused by some causes, such as they were limited knowledge in using grammar correctly and appropriately, they did not know about students are confused about using grammatical structure in their essay writing, first language transfer, and the carelessness of students when writing an essay.

### *Keywords:*

*Grammar Problems, Writing Essay, and English Education.*

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## 1. Introduction

Writing is one of four main skills in learning English. It is an activity that is regarded as a productive skill it aims at assisting students in expressing their idea. Through writing, people are capable of sharing, feelings, persuading, and convincing others. Byrne (1979) stated that writing is one of the skills that tell the writer's ideas into written form. It is also an act of the process of organizing the student's ideas, putting them on paper, and then revising them. According to Sheridan (1991), writing is the most important to do. It helped us to catch our idea, realized our thought, and in this case writing as a media of human communication that represents ideas and thought on paper. Sabrina et al. (2020) also added that writing becomes a nightmare for students and becomes a complex task because the students need process, more practice, and some steps to be able to make good writing. In other words, writing can be a media for students to improve their ability

to think idea, and opinion clearly in a paper or other written media that give information to the people.

Writing is an English skill that is not easy for EFL learners. According to Eemmaryana (2010), in the process of learning English, writing ability is the most difficult and complicated language skill to be learned almost by students at every level of education and fact, at the level of the university, writing is still a difficult subject because it needs to spend much energy and time to think about the idea to make a good paper and can be easily understood by the readers. In order to minimize problems, students need the best learning technique which can effect and increase their writing skills, for instance, free writing technique (Dewi et al., 2021). So, the students should have well knowledge and hard thinking in writing. Besides, there are many elements that students should master such as grammar, content, form, styles, and spelling. Furthermore, the problems of students in writing not only that, many of them have problems with a lack of vocabulary, the right choice of words, coherency, and the important thing is grammar.

Grammar is important in writing. According to Tale & Goodarzi in (Dewii et al., 2020), grammar is a necessary component in language teaching and learning. Grammar helps the writer produce sentences, from sentences to paragraphs, and from paragraphs to a text. In the writing process, grammatical aspects are needed to make a good paragraph and the writer must understand the grammar to convey the ideas clearly. There are many aspects of English grammar to construct sentences in writing. Thats are should be learned carefully in order to avoid incomprehensible sentences. Generally, grammar contains tenses, adjectives, adverbs, articles, pronouns, verbs, auxiliaries, prepositions, gerunds, conjunction, etc. Grammar is one of the important things in a language. It makes students know how to produce good sentences and express ideas and feelings. By using grammar correctly, somebody will tend to write and speak English well. It is supported by Harmer who states that if grammar rules are too carelessly violated, communication may suffer (Harmer, 2001). Based on this point of view, in the writing process, students need grammatical understanding in order to make their writing that can be understandable.

In writing, the issue of grammar problems is unavoidable for students. This problem occurs because the students' understanding of using correct grammar is limited. Swales & Feak (2012) stated that the grammatical problem is a complicated one since many instructors do not appreciate how difficult it is to master some aspects of English such as articles (*a, an, and the*), verb tenses, subject-verb agreements, and prepositions. Many students sometimes make some mistakes in their writing because they find some difficulties in applying grammar to make good sentences. They cannot write based on good grammatical rules and features of the text itself. The problems that students faced in writing especially in essay writing are about how to make good writing by using grammatical rules. Thus, grammar cannot be neglected by the students since it is equally important as the flow of ideas and also can influence the quality of writing.

In the course of writing III at the English Department of Halu Oleo University, writing an essay is one of the materials taught. Several essay materials have been taught, which are comparison-contrast essays, problem-solving essays, and argumentative essays. In the syllabus, this course's objectives are the students will be

able to learn how to organize a large, and complex topic, able to plan, and write an argumentative essay, choose, organize, and develop ideas in paragraphs, and essays, recognize and produce clear topic sentences, supporting, and concluding sentences, use correct word-level grammar most of the time.

Of the several types of essays taught, the argumentative essay is one of the essays taught in this course. In an argumentative essay, students should research a topic to get evidence so that they can give ideas or opinions that they have thought about the topic and then put them into writing. The topic in an argumentative essay should be narrowed down and it should contain an argument. The writer also must have a deep understanding, deep thought, and extensive knowledge if they want to take a good topic to their writing. Based on the researchers' experience who have taken this course, many problems cause some mistakes in essay writing. Therefore, this research wants to know the problems in writing essays at Halu Oleo University with the purpose to make the students should be aware of writing and make it well in writing essays. It will be done to show some parts of the material that needs further explanation.

With regard to this problem, the researcher did a brief observation with an interview with several students at the English Department of Halu Oleo University, especially the students who were programs writing III in the year 2017 about writing essays. The researcher found the problems in writing from several questions asked to the students about what they learned in writing 3, what was the difficulty, and what was the problem. Based on the interview, many students had problems with punctuation, vocabulary, coherency, and grammatical. Especially in grammatical, they usually made mistakes in their essay writing because they did not understand to make a paragraph with good grammar and have limited knowledge about it. It could be seen in their essay writing, there are some mistakes from grammatical aspects that students made. This situation gave the researcher reason to find out the grammatical problems in the essay. It will give advantage for them to increasing their grammar ability especially in writing to be better. Therefore, to make good writing students should be more aware of and understand well about English grammar

For this reason, this research analyzed more deeply grammatical problems in essays written by the English students of Halu Oleo University. The researcher conducted the research entitled "Student's Grammatical Problems in Writing Essay at English Language Education Department of Halu Oleo University". This research focused on the student's grammatical problems in writing essays students in the year 2017 in Writing III subject and was just concerned with four aspects of their problems: subject-verb agreement, tenses, pronouns, and prepositions.

## **2. Methods**

This research used a descriptive qualitative design. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2000), qualitative research was multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. The participants of this study were the sixth-semester students of Writing III (writing class A) at the English Education Department of Halu Oleo University in the year 2017 which consisted of 10 students from 41 students. According to Creswell (2003), the number of

participants in qualitative research was usually 5 to 10 people, but if not already if data saturation was achieved, the number of participants could be increased until occurs repetition of information from participants. The researcher used purposive sampling in selecting participants as a sample.

To collect the data for this research, the researcher chose students' final assignment about argumentative essays in writing III class (writing class A) from the writing III lecturers which were in this one of the course objectives in the syllabus to be able to plan and write an argumentative essay, and interview guide with a complete and detailed list of questions such as referred to structure interview and the researcher made based on the purpose and scope of the research. Moreover, in analyzing the data, the researcher used qualitative data analysis based on several steps, namely identifying, evaluating, interviewing, and concluding.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. Students' Grammatical Mistakes in Writing Essay**

To find the student's grammar problems in writing essays, the researcher has taken students' essay writing from the Writing III lecturer. The researcher only takes 10 students as a sample and analyzes the data from the students' writing to find out the mistakes that students make in their essay. The researcher identifies the grammar mistakes and classifies into five aspects, namely subject-verb agreement, tenses, pronoun, and preposition. Student's mistakes are marked in red. The result of this identification can be seen as the following explanation.

##### *a) Subject-Verb Agreement*

Student 1 has problems using subject-verb agreement. There are 6 mistakes that he makes. His problems are in using plural and singular forms in a sentence, and in using an auxiliary verb. Student 2 has problems in using subject-verb agreement. There are 5 mistakes that she made. From these mistakes, her problems are in using plural and singular forms. It can be seen in her essay, she uses the plural in the sentence, but for the verb, she uses the singular verb. Student 3 has problems using subject-verb agreement. Same as the others students, the problem that student 3 is in using rules in sentences. There are mistakes in using plural and singular subjects that she makes in writing the essay. Student 4 has problems using subject-verb agreement. There are 14 mistakes that she makes in her essay writing. All the mistakes for subject-verb agreement are similar. There are mistakes in using plural and singular subjects that she makes in writing the essay. Student 5 still has problems using subject-verb agreement. There are 5 mistakes that she makes. All of the mistakes are the same, in using plural and singular form. It means that she has problems in differentiate between plural and singular.

Student 6 has problems using subject-verb agreement. It can be seen in her essay writing, there are some mistakes that she makes. Student 6 still has mistakes in the use of singular and plural forms when writing an essay. Student 7 has problems using subject-verb agreement. There are 7 mistakes in his essay writing. The mistakes are in using singular and plural forms and mistakes in subject-verb agreement with pronouns. Student 8 has problems in using subject-verb agreement, especially in using singular and plural forms, and mistakes subject-verb agreement with pronouns. It can be seen in the mistakes above. The verb does not seem to agree

with the subject. It means that she has problems with it. Student 9 has some problems using subject-verb agreement. Same as the other students, her mistake is in using singular and plural forms, because most of the mistakes that she makes in her essay writing. The subject and verb in the sentences do not agree. Student 10 still has problems using subject-verb agreement. Her mistakes are the same as the other students. It can be seen in her mistakes above, the mistake that she makes about plural and singular forms, and in using the auxiliary verb.

From the result of the finding above about grammatical mistakes in using subject-verb agreement, it can be concluded that every student makes a mistake in this aspect. There are 76 mistakes that students make in their essay writing. It can be known that they still have problems using subject-verb agreement. Therefore, Most of the students have mistaken in adding  $\pm$  "s" in the sentences, in using an auxiliary verb and using plural and singular.

*b) Tenses*

Student 1 has problems using tenses in writing essays. The mistakes are in using simple present because some sentences do not have to be and other sentences are not appropriate with the forms of the tense. Student 2 does not have many problems using tenses. The mistake that she makes about the simple present in nominal sentences. Student 4 has problems using tenses, especially in using simple presents. There are some mistakes in the sentences that do not have a subject and verb, and she does not use the appropriate tenses in her essay writing. Student 4 has problems in using tenses, especially in using simple present (nominal and verbal). There are some mistakes that she makes about that. Student 5 has many problems using tenses. There are 13 mistakes that she makes. The mistakes in the sentences are do not have a subject and verb, and she does not use the appropriate tenses in her essay writing.

Student 6 has problems using tenses. There are 6 mistakes that she makes in her essay writing. The mistakes are in using simple present. Some of the mistakes in her essay does not have to be and also there are missing subject in the sentence. Student 7 has problems using tenses. The mistakes in his essay writing are in using simple present (nominal), some of the sentences do not have to be, and using inappropriate tenses in the sentence. Student 8 has problems using tenses. There are 6 mistakes that she makes in her essay writing. Some of the mistakes in her essay does not have to be and also there are missing subject in the sentence. Student 9 has a little bit problem using tenses. There are 2 mistakes that she makes in her essay writing. The mistakes in her essay do not have to be and also there are missing subjects in the sentence.

Based on the result of the data above, it can be concluded that the students still have problems using tenses. It can be seen in their essay writing, there are 60 mistakes that the researcher found. The mistakes made are different, it consists of mistakes in using simple present, do not have a subject or verb in their sentences, etc.

*c) Pronoun*

Student 1 still has problems using pronouns, because of some mistakes that he makes. The sentences are not clear because does not have a pronoun in the sentence that refers to, to make the sentences clear. Student 2 seems does not have many problems using pronouns. The mistake made is only the lack of a pronoun in a sentence so the sentence is not clear. Student 3 seems does not have many problems using pronouns. The mistake that she made is only the lack of a pronoun in a sentence so the sentence is not clear, and it is inappropriate in using a possessive pronoun. Student 4 seems does not have many problems using a pronoun. The mistake that she made is only the lack of a pronoun in a sentence so the sentence is not clear. Student 5 seems does not have many problems using pronouns. The mistake made only in a sentence does not have a subject to make this sentence clear.

Student 6 does not have any problem using the pronoun, because only has one mistake that she made. Student 7 seems not to have many problems using pronouns. The mistake that she made only 1 that is choosing the inappropriate pronoun. Student 8, still has problems using pronouns, because of some mistakes that he made. The mistake is the sentence is in using 2 pronouns in 1 sentence. Student 10 seems does not have many problems using pronouns.

From the result of the finding above about grammatical mistakes in using pronouns, every student makes a few mistakes in this aspect. It can be known that they still have a little problem using pronouns. There are 26 mistakes that students made in their essay writing. Their mistakes in using pronouns consist of adding unnecessary pronouns in the sentence, and mistakes in using object pronouns in the sentence.

#### *d) Preposition*

Student 1 has problems using prepositions. There are 5 mistakes in his essay writing. From the mistakes, it can be concluded that student 1 has problems in using a preposition to, on, and in using prepositions because of. Student 2 seems does not have many problems using a pronoun. Student 3 has a little problem using prepositions. There are only 2 mistakes in her essay writing. The mistakes are in using prepositions, and the lack of prepositions in the sentence to make the meaning of the sentence clear. Student 4 has a problem using a preposition. The mistakes in using prepositions are in using prepositions such as *in, on, to, etc.* Student 5 has problems with using *from* in a sentence. Based on the mistakes, it can be concluded that student 5 has problems using a preposition. The mistakes are in using prepositions *of, from, etc.* In this paragraph, some mistakes are repeated.

Student 6 has problems using prepositions. There are 7 mistakes in her essay writing. The mistakes are in using prepositions *in, or, for, etc.* and there is no preposition between 2 nouns/pronouns in the sentence. Student 7 has problems using a preposition. There are 7 mistakes in his essay. The mistakes are in using prepositions *for, of, to, etc.* Also, there is a mistake that is inappropriate in the sentence. Student 8 still has problems in using a preposition, because there are some mistakes in the sentences of her essay writing does not have a preposition, but that sentences need it to make sentences clear. Student 9 still has problems using prepositions. There are 4 mistakes in his essay. The mistakes are in using prepositions *for, by, to, etc.* Also, there is a mistake that is inappropriate in the

sentence. Student 10 still has problems using prepositions because there are some mistakes such as mistakes in using a preposition to, by, in, etc.

Based on the result of the data above, it can be concluded that the students still have problems using prepositions. It can be seen in their essay writing, there are 56 mistakes found. The mistakes made are different, it consists of the use of wrong prepositions, they often put unimportant prepositions in their sentences and the researcher found that their mistakes in prepositions are in the same case but in different prepositions.

### **3.2. Students Grammar Problems**

Based on the result of the interview about grammatical problems in writing essays, it can be concluded that they have difficulty in using grammatical aspects in writing essays. Most of them have problems using subject-verb agreement. It is because they do not master the aspect and not know in using it. There is a match between interview results and students' writing about these aspects. All of them make mistakes in adding ± "s" even for the subject or the object in determining verb and using an auxiliary verb *to be*, and mistakes in the use of plural and singular forms in a sentence.

The second problem is tenses, in their essay writing, every student makes mistakes in using tenses. It is because they still do not understand in using the right tenses in writing an essay. The resulting interview and the students' grammar mistakes in their essay writing are matched enough because some of the students use the wrong tenses. It means that some of them still does not understand the use of tenses in writing essay and it matches based on the interview because they say that tenses are enough difficult and sometimes, they do not know in choosing the right tenses in their essay writing.

The third problem is prepositions, most students have problems with this aspect because in using it some prepositions have the same meaning, they are confused in applying it and they also have difficulty in using the appropriate preposition to make good sentences. There is a match between interview results and students' writing about these aspects. Some of the students make a mistake in using prepositions on, in, and at, and based on the interview, they say that they are still confused and do not use the correct preposition in writing.

The last problem is pronouns, based on the interview, some of the students already understand this aspect, but the other students have problems with this aspect because sometimes they do not aware of other pronouns and are only aware of subject pronouns. In the interview, some of the students say that they already understand pronouns in their essay writing, but there are some mistakes that they made in their essay writing. It means that they have problems with this. From the interview, they say that they sometimes do not care and are less careless in using pronouns so there is a mistake in their essays.

## **4. Discussion**

Based on the findings and identification directly above, the researcher finds that the students make mistakes in their essay writing, such as Subject-Verb

Agreements 75 mistakes, tenses 60 mistakes, pronouns 26 mistakes, and Prepositions 56 mistakes. It can be stated that the students get a problem applying the word choice which should be added in a sentence based on the appropriate rules. It means that most problems done by students in their essay writing are on Subject-Verb Agreement.

The main problem faced by students in writing an essay is Subject-Verb Agreement. The main factor of these problems cause the students to have difficulties in matching the subject and the verb in the sentence and their lack of knowledge about the rules of the target language. As a general rule, a singular subject requires a singular verb, and a plural subject requires a plural verb. According to Astriyanti (2016), the use of the suffix *s* or *es* in a sentence is a problem that usually arises among English learners. This rule can be confusing to the students and based on the analysis of their essay writing, they can not differentiate between plural and singular forms. So, they make many mistakes in determining the correct subject and verb in the sentence in their essay writing. It happens because of mother tongue interference, this finding is appropriated by the statement of an expert, Richard. According to Richard (1974), mother-tongue interference is one of the causes of mistakes in writing. The language aspects (tenses and subject-verb agreement) differ from those they have in their L1 (Indonesian language) and also the students are careless when writing in English. The attributive after the subject may be too long and it confuses the students to use the wrong verbs also the mistakes are caused by the lack of anticipation of the writer on the corresponding noun related to that verb.

The second problem is tenses, the researcher assumed that mistakes in tense happen because the students still lack understanding in the use of tenses when writing essays especially indication of time with present, past, future, and continuous. Background of English knowledge, especially in the mastery of vocabulary quantities and knowledge of word classes causing mistakes in choosing the right words and structural mistakes in phrases and sentences. The translation is also a factor in students' problems in writing essays. The Indonesian language does not have grammar rules and it's different from English, but most students usually translate their first language sentence into the target language word by word, which makes the sentence that their write sometimes wrong because of the wrong word choice. In addition, Fengjie et al. (2016) found that using correct tenses is one of the common problems encountered by college students in writing.

The third problem is a preposition, based on the result the students' mistakes in a preposition, there are 56 mistakes often put the unimportant preposition in their sentences. In using a preposition, one can be aware because there is no certain rule for this. One has to determine which preposition should be used based on its context. The researcher finds that their mistakes in prepositions are in the same case but different prepositions. It causes the students confused in choosing the appropriate preposition and the irregularity of uses when writing an essay. The wrong choice is normally, caused by mother tongue interference. In addition, Hamzah (2012) found that when the students do not know the exact preposition to use, they use their existing language rules to map up and shape the intended form.

The fewest problem from the 4 aspects of grammar that students faced by students in writing an essay is a pronoun. There are 26 mistakes in the students'



essay writing. Compared to tenses, students do not face too many problems with pronouns in writing essays. This is because students already have a lot of understanding of pronouns. The mistakes made by students are caused by their carelessness of students, they are not careful when writing essays.

In addition, some previous studies also proved this research. The first have been done by Siregar (2014) which found that many students made many errors in grammatical aspects of their writing and the result shows the students lack grammar knowledge. Then, Ikrima (2015) investigated the purpose to investigate the grammatical and vocabulary problem faced by students in writing and describe the efforts made by teachers to solve the problem in writing. The results showed that the students faced the main problem in grammatical and the least problem was vocabulary.

Based on the result, it can be stated that the students still fail to apply grammar in complex sentences because their writing skills are still not good enough, the students still translate every word in their minds without paying attention to the rules of grammar. It can be proven that they commit the mistake in writing. The result can be concluded that the students commit grammatical problems in writing based on categories of Subject-Verb Agreement, Tenses, Pronoun, and Preposition. The researcher finds the common problems that exist in the students' writings are in the category of Subject-Verb Agreement.

In summary, dominantly, most of the students are made mistakes because of several factors such as native language transfers, having limited time in writing that makes them lack focus, not aware if made a mistake, forgetting about the rules, and not careful in writing. Actually, they have studied grammar but failed in applying their knowledge in complex sentences that makes them confused with the right pattern.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the result of this study, it can be concluded that the highest grammatical problem that students face in their essay writing is Subject-Verb Agreement. The data analysis and finding show that 217 total mistakes have done by students in students' essay writing. The highest frequencies of mistakes happen in Subject-Verb Agreement which consists of 75 mistakes. Tenses consists of 60 mistakes. Preposition consists of 26 mistakes. Pronoun consists of 56 mistakes. Moreover, the common problem that students face in writing essays is Subject-Verb Agreement. The grammar problems are caused by some causes, namely students have limited knowledge in using grammar correctly and appropriately, they do not know and confused about using grammatical structure in their essay writing, the students' problems can be due to L1 transfer, and the carelessness of students when writing an essay.

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