An ESL Error Analysis of Research Articles Written by Indonesian Scholars

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian scholars increasingly write original research articles in English for publication in international journals. This paper is an analysis of linguistic and stylistic errors in a sample of draft journal articles written by Indonesian scholars. First, the size of uncorrected and corrected drafts was compared. Second, errors in sample articles were coded and categorized using emergent categories, frequency was counted, and errors then analyzed for possible causes.

Uncorrected drafts were 10%–25% longer than corrected drafts.

The most common errors were tense, passive voice, and word choice. Others included redundancy, extra or missing words, incorrect verb forms, use of noun phrases instead of verb phrases, and placement of finite verbs near the end of sentences. Another category was reserved for sentences that needed to be recast, usually because they contained multiple errors.

Grammar checking software could offer some corrections, while other errors required training in writing, including style and the method of recasting sentences.

Key words: *ESL, EFL, TEAP, error analysis, academic writing*.

INTRODUCTION

In order to participate in the international research community, Indonesian scholars increasingly write original research articles for publication in international journals. However, that requires a high level of English language proficiency. In many cases, only well-informed academics can understand research journal articles because the topics are highly specialized and require background knowledge in the relevant discipline.

However, very few Indonesian researchers have native speaker proficiency in research English. Consequently, they normally need to submit drafts to a native speaker for best results.

An analysis of errors would enable Indonesian universities to provide training in advanced proficiency in academic English that particularly addresses the most common errors. Resarchers would improve their writing, reduce their dependence on native speaker editors, and increase the probability that international publishers will accept those articles for publication. It might also have a flow-one benefit for graduate students embarking on research.

The core research questions in this research were:

1. What kinds of English language errors do Indonesian scholars make when writing research articles in English?
2. In what frequency do they make those errors?

Literature review

Following Markhamah (2010), Kurniadi (2017) distinguishes between errors and mistakes. Errors follow consistent patterns, while mistakes are random aberrations. In this study, writers have had ample opportunity to edit their language, so that anything incorrect is deemed to be an error.

Language errors include errors of style. In this sense, "style" refers to aspects of language structure that make it attractive to readers, and stylistic errors are instances of language that are grammatically correct but are undesirable because they are difficult to read. ("Style" also has two other separate meanings: "the rules for setting out a piece of writing for publication" and "the individual characteristics of a particular writer.")

Gowers wrote one of the most influential guides to English style. It was first published in 1948 and then expanded to become *The Complete Plain Words,* published in 1954. Since then, many other writers have published their own.

The recent literature contains relatively few language error analyses, especially of written language of academic staff. The existing literature has a distinct gap in the analysis of language errors in research articles written in English by academics who are not native speaker of English.

As for methodology, Wee et al. (2009) used a pre-test and a post-test to collect data on subject-verb agreement. The tests comprise a 350-word essay that students wrote within a time limit. Khoso et al. (2018) used a questionnaire with a Likert scale to gather the views of Pakistani university EFL students' views of common errors.

Mencias and de Vera (n.d.) used a multiple choice survey to gather demographic data and then used two writing activities to gather langage data: a reading with comprehension questions, and a photograph with comprehension questions. They then classified errors as errors of "selection," "omission," and "addition."

In this study, the overall approach followed Huberman and Miles (1994, pp. 429) whose view of data analysis has three stages: reducing data, displaying data, and drawing conclusions. This is similar to the method of Hassan et al. (2009), in which

they classified grammatical errors into general categories such as grammar, word, lexical, formal, style, lexico grammar, and register. They also scored frequency for all error categories (p. 86).

It is also similar to Kampookaew's method. (2020) She used essays written by Thai university students as data. She classified errors into ten types, and identified the most frequent errors, which were nouns, determiners, verbs, word classes, and prepositions. She then further divided the ten types of errors into sub-types.

In this study, the data reduction stage reduced the full amount of data to a dataset that is useful to address the research questions. In this case it comprised coding. (Cf. Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 55–70; Silverman 1993, pp. 37–42.)

METHOD

The methodology included identifying a sample, comparing word totals between first draft and edited versions, and identifying and categorizing errors.

The sample

The sample was a series of archived research articles in English that Indonesian writers had submitted for language correction in preparation for publication. Some papers has sole authors, while other were collaborations. The five authors held academic positions and represented four different universities. Demographic data (age, gender, etc.) was not collected.

All articles were written for submission to international journals of refereed research and related to either to teaching English as a second or foreign language or to online teaching. The archives for each article had two versions: one before editing and one after. All non-prose content was removed from the articles, such as titles, tables, diagrams, illustrations, and bibliographies.

For ethical reasons, all identifying information was removed. The writers are not classified as human subjects of research because the researcher did not interact with them during the research, nor use identifiable private information. (Cf. CFR §46.102 (e) (1).)

Comparison of word totals

The first evaluation was to compare the word totals of the original and revised versions. The purpose was to get a broad overview of the effects of errors in the original drafts and the effects of subsequent editing.

Publishers often specify minimum and maximum word totals, so length affects acceptability for publication. In one case, the original draft had met the publisher's standards for word length. However, the language editor had reduced the word total so much that the article no longer met the journal's minimum word total, and the journal editor rejected it.

Method for Specific Kinds of Errors

The method was to identify linguistic errors in the articles. Typographical errors were not counted, although this was problematical when only one letter indicates plural, tense, or verb conjugation, for example, the word-final *s*. Anthropomorphisms were not counted although some style guides prohibit them. An anthropomorphism is a treatment of an object as if it were a human, for example, "This study aims to …." A study is not a person and cannot do anything.

The word *Therefore* signifies such a strong logical link that it is usually high risk. However, it was also not counted because it is a feature of content more than a feature of language.

At each error a code was inserted that recorded the nature of the error. In later coding, a correction was added to the code so that it would be useful in future instruction.

The data display stage comprised grouping errors into narrow categories, which were emergent, not predetermined, so that they reflected the actual errors. By being narrow, these categories represented data accurately.

The data display stage comprised expressing errors as raw frequencies according to categories in tables, with one table for each article. It was also necessary to check category names for consistency. The comments column in the table contains further explanation of category names.

The analysis stage consisted of grouping categories into broader categories to identify any overall patterns in the data. It was then possible to draw conclusions based on the emergent patterns.

Limitations

This method has various limitations, although it would be difficult to show that they invalidate findings.

First, even when an error is corrected, the next draft might still require further editing. That is, corrections do not necessarily ensure that a draft will be publishable.

Second, one element can contain two kinds of errors. For example, the sentence below is both in the passive voice and uses an incorrect verb form: *Video can be showed to students.*

Third, the manual processing of data easily results in errors, although they are presumably quite minor.

Fourth, the articles only give a snapshot of each writer's proficiency at one point in time. Even if it is completely accurate, it does not necessarily indicate the reason why the writer made that mistake nor the stage of the writer's acquisition of English.

Fifth, it draws attention to writers' errors, not to what writers did correctly.

Sixth, serious errors are assigned the same weight as those that are much less serious. For example, the passive voice is occasionally preferable to the active voice, although the passive voice in English is not usually good practice.

Another example of weighting is clustered errors where all instances in the cluster share the same cause. Consequently, a lone occurrence is more significant (that is, it should be assigned more weight) than the same error occurring in a cluster. Several examples of clusters should suffice:

1. Methodology plans or reports often contain a large cluster of passive voice sentences, because the action is important and the performer of the action is not.
2. Parallelism is good English style, but it can result in clusters of errors. If a parallelism contains an undesirable element, that element is replicated throughout the sentence.
3. Informal English often uses the second person personal pronoun in hypothetical examples. (*If you go down the street and turn right at the blue house …*) An extended hypothetical case results in a cluster of personal pronouns, which are undesirable in formal research writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Comparison of word totals

Table 1 contains the comparison of word totals of the original and revised versions. The most interesting feature is that many edited versions had about 10% fewer words than the originals, and in one case was about 25%. This indicates extensive errors but does not their specific natures, a task done later in this study.

Table 1: Comparison of Word Totals

Article	Original	Final
1	4,865	4,390
2	4,811	4,403
3	7,062	6,212
4	5,851	5,317
5	8,298	6,018

Overall error patterns

Errors were placed in broader categories to identify overall patterns in the data. The only error not be categorized was that of placing full references in the text. Publishers and academic institutions issue guides for placing minimal references in the text and full references in a bibliography.

Some terms for errors are quite clear. The ordinary meaning applies and no explanation or comment is necessary. However, other terms need either definition or description. Some grammatical terms also have alternatives. Errors in style particularly

need comment such as description or examples. Comments are placed below after the category lists.

Frequency

Frequency indicates the pervasiveness of an error, but not necessarily its importance. The five articles had different patterns of error frequency, but tense, passive voice, and incorrect word choice featured most prominently. Other errors in high frequency were as follows:

1. Clumsy
2. Extra words
3. Finite verb near end of sentence
4. Incorrect verb forms
5. Missing words
6. Noun phrase
7. Redundancy

Grammar, punctuation, and sentence length

The first category of errors is grammar and punctuation, which includes the following:

1. Adjective form
2. Adverb instead of adjective
3. Incorrect or missing determiner(s)
4. Incorrect punctuation
5. Incorrect verb form(s)
6. Long sentence(s)
7. Missing suffix
8. Run-together sentence(s)
9. Sentences with no finite verb
10. Singular-plural confusion
11. Subject-verb agreement
12. Tense
13. Unclear subject or no subject in sentence
14. Used plural for a mass noun
15. Mood
16. Word order

Incorrect or missing determiner(s)	Determiner refers to the particles *the*, *a* and *an*. An alternative term is *article*.
Long sentence(s)	The preferred maximum in English is usually about 30–35 words.
Run-together sentence(s)	These are two separate sentences put together as if they were one sentences. For example:

	I like cake this is a cat.
Singular-plural confusion	The writer used singular when it should have been plural or vice versa.

Judging errors in grammar and punctuation is not difficult because formal English has clear rules. In most cases, software applications can identify errors and offer solutions, including many low frequency errors in the sample. Grammar checkers can also identify long sentences, so it is included in this category.

The most frequent exception was tenses, which usually had correct grammar but were inappropriate in context. The simple past tense was most often correct, but writers often used present, simple past, and perfect tense almost as if they were interchangeable.

The style category

It was surprising that the articles in the sample did not contain any errors in paragraph length. This category includes the following errors:

1. "Also" at the beginning of sentence
2. Existential(s)
3. Finite verb near end of sentence
4. Noun phrase
5. Passive voice
6. Personal pronoun
7. Preposition at end of sentence
8. Redundancy
9. Separate sentences that should be joined

"Also" at the beginning of sentence	Structure indicates that the remainder of the sentence is an afterthought.
Existential(s)	Existentials are *there is*, *there are*, etc. They only state that something exists. Writers should recast the sentence or use more expressive verbs that say more. Poor: *There were four people sitting around the table.* Better: *Four people were sitting around the table.*
Finite verb near end of sentence	The finite verb should be near the beginning of the sentence. Poor: *After considering a range of policies, meeting various officials, and interviewing dozens of respondents, they had lunch.* Better: *They had lunch after considering a range of policies, meeting various officials, and interviewing dozens of respondents.*
Noun phrase	The sentence uses a noun phrase when a verb phrase is preferable. In English, a verb is normally preferable to a

	noun. Example: Poor: *Mr. Jones facilitated the implementation of the program.* Better: *Mr. Jones implemented the program.*
Passive voice	As a general rule, writers of English should avoid the passive voice, and beginning writers learn to avoid it completely. Some cases of passive voice are less problematical than others, and it is sometimes necessary.
Personal pronoun	In formal English, writers should either minimize or eliminate the first person (*I*, *me*), and completely avoid addressing the reader (*you*).
Preposition at end of sentence	Writers should avoid placing prepositions at the end of sentences in formal writing, although it is common and quite permissible in informal English.
Redundancy	The writer unnecessarily repeated the same meaning.
Separate sentences that should be joined	The writer wrote two short consecutive sentences on the same topic. For example: Poor: *The second is called the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is the set of outcomes that educators do not explicitly plan.* Better: *The second is called the hidden curriculum, which is the set of outcomes that educators do not explicitly plan.* Another kind of example is sentences incorrectly split into two sentences that should be joined. For example: *I went to the cafe. To buy a cup of coffee.*

Most aspects of style follow simple formulae and exemplar, but others require an aesthetic sense and do not follow formulae. Software increasingly identifies stylistic errors and sometimes suggests corrections.

The category of social convention

Language has subdialects according to social convention. This category of errors includes informality, slang, and unsuitable tone. Some software applications can identify some of these kinds of errors, for example identifying *don't* as informal and suggesting *do not* as the formal equivalent. Although software can also associate shorter sentences with informal language, it does not necessarily resolve errors of informality, slang, and unsuitable tone.

The category of more complex errors

In these cases, writers need to understand what they write and cannot apply formulaic solutions, because errors might have one or more causes. These errors might

be less of a problem if writers have used software to make check grammar and readability.

For example, “clumsy” sentences usually have multiple errors and need to be recast. Semantic errors are those where a sentence does not contain enough information for the editor to understand the author’s intended meaning. It might ambiguous, or the literal meaning might be inconsistent with the apparent intent. Words can have nuances of meaning that make them inappropriate in particular circumstances. Verbiage and weak words are actually elements of style, but verbiage correction requires analysis, and weak words require understanding of vocabulary.

The errors in this category are as follows:

1. Clumsy
2. Extra words
3. Incorrect word choice
4. Missing word(s)
5. Overstatement
6. Semantics
7. Undefined term
8. Verbiage
9. Weak word(s)

Clumsy	“Clumsy”sentences need to be recast. They usually contain multiple errors.
Extra words	These words are superfluous and should be deleted.
Incorrect word choice	Words have nuances of meaning that make them inappropriate in some contexts. Some of these are hard to teach, e.g. when *could* is correct and *can* is not. Many English speakers do not know when to use *that* and when to use *which*.
Semantics	The sentence does not contain enough information for the reader to understand the author’s intended meaning. It might ambiguous, or the stated meaning might be inconsistent with the apparent intent.
Verbiage	The sentence is complex and confusing. It contains extra words that add nothing to the meaning but add to the word total. Writers should recast these sentences in simpler language and fewer words.
Weak word(s)	Writers can often delete weak words when they add no meaning. Some of the most frequent are *situation*, *process*, *occur*, *experience*, and *happen*.

Native Language Interference

The cause of some errors seems to be native language interference. (This assumes that Indonesian is the native language. However, most Indonesian speakers also speak a local ethic language.)

Malay is a close cognate of Indonesian. Two studies of English errors among Malay speakers found similar errors to those above, and attributed them to native language interference. Although Hassan et al. (2009) looked only at grammatical competence in oral language in speakers of Malay they found similar frequent errors in verb tense, noun number, subject-verb-agreement, missing words, and lexical choice (pp. 86f.) Similarly, Maros et al. (2007) used short essays ranging from 56 to 385 words to assess grammatical errors in Malay high school students. They also found determiner, subject-verb agreement, and the copula "be" to be the three most problematic grammatical categories among students, and these reflected the interference of Malay.

A further comparison indicates the difficulties facing Indonesian writers:

1. Writers seem to have written some sentences first in Indonesian and then made a literal translation into English. In order to understand those sentences, one translates them literally back into Indonesian to see what the writer originally said.
2. Indonesian frequently uses the passive voice where the active voice is preferable in English.
3. Indonesian often uses noun phrases where it is preferable to use verbs in English.
4. Writers had difficulty with English verbs, making errors in tense, subject-verb agreement, verb forms, and (in one instance) in mood. The possible cause is the difference between English and Indonesian. Unlike Indonesian, English has a complex system of obligatory conjugation, mood, and tense embedded in its verb phrases. Instead of tenses, Indonesian has a system of temporals to indicate time (e.g. *belum* 'not yet', *sudah* 'already', *sedang* 'currently happening', *akan* 'will happen in future') and these can be optional if they are not necessary to the meaning of the sentence. Most Indonesian verbs consist of a root word that is modified with prefixes and suffixes the meanings of which do not equate to any aspects of English verbs.
5. Whether or not it is good standard Indonesian, Indonesian is more tolerant than English of placing the finite verb nearer the end of a sentence.
6. Existentials are very common in Indonesian (*ada*) although they are not favored in formal English style.
7. Indonesian does not have a simple plural like English. Specification of plurals is optional, and the reduplication of nouns tends to imply the notion of "various kinds."
8. Although the nature of redundancy was outside the scope of this study, Indonesian seems to favor some redundancy where it not preferable in English. Similarly, Indonesian also seems to require that some items be made explicit where in English they are clearly implicit and would be redundant if mentioned.

CONCLUSION

A recurring theme is that software can reduce or minimize errors, and a basic software check of grammar, spelling, punctuation and sentence length should be mandatory before submitting articles to editors. However, errors differ in complexity, and writers can only resolve some kinds of errors with an improved understanding of English. The most common apparent cause of errors was native language interference.

Analysis of a larger sample would be helpful to further establish, or perhaps revise, conclusions and to achieve data saturation.

Other questions for further research include the following:

1. Do the number and category of errors vary between different parts of academic papers? For example, do they vary between introductions, literature reviews, analyses, and conclusions?
2. To what extent does the quality of language vary between different Indonesian scholars? If it does vary, why? Does age have an effect?
3. Do writers make more errors when they try to communicate complex concepts?
4. To what extent are language variations the result of native language interference? What discourse and semantic characteristics have writers carried over from Indonesian or a local ethnic language? Do Indonesian semantic structures differ greatly from their English equivalents?
5. To what extent do writers acquire errors from teachers who lack proficiency in English?
6. To what extent have errors fossilized?
7. How do these error patterns compare with those of native English speakers? How do they compare with ESL writers who have other language backgrounds?
8. What cultural factors (such as politeness markers) result in apparent errors?
9. When do discourse markers in the writers' first language result in apparent errors?
10. Do writers have patterns of inconsistency where the same writer sometimes makes mistakes and sometimes does not?
11. Software programs can already check readability, punctuation, and grammar, including common errors found in the sample articles, such as conjugations, verb forms, and subject-verb agreement. They can check spelling and its compliance with particular conventions, such as US or UK spelling. Some software can also check elements of style, inviting the following questions:
    a. To what extent does software contribute to language improvement, and when does it create a false sense of security?
    b. When is software useful for checking journal articles, and when should institutions recommend or require it as a writing method?
    c. When should it be an element in a standardized research methodology for error analysis?
    d. What are the ethics of software use in higher education writing? For example, at what point does the software act as a ghost writer? That is, could an institution

say that a student must fail a thesis or dissertation because he/she does not have the required writing skills and has depended too heavily on software?

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APPENDIX

Table 2: Analysis of Article 1

Freq.	Nature of Error	Comments
23	Tense	
23	Passive voice	
10	Incorrect word choice	
8	Noun phrase	
6	Missing word(s)	
5	Semantics	
4	Redundancy	
3	"Also" at the beginning of sentence	
3	Verbiage	
3	Existential(s)	
2	Long sentence(s)	One of these was 52 words.
2	Incorrect punctuation	Missing comma
2	Personal pronoun	
1	Extra words	
1	Finite verb near end of sentence	
1	Incorrect or missing determiner(s)	
1	Overstatement	
1	Preposition at end of sentence	
1	Separate sentences that should be joined	
1	Singular-plural confusion	
1	Weak word(s)	

Table 3: Analysis of Article 2

Freq.	Nature of error	Comments
60	Tense	
31	Extra words	Some of these are weak words.
19	Incorrect word choice	
17	Passive voice	
13	Verbiage	
8	Incorrect verb form(s)	
7	Redundancy	
5	Semantics	
4	Finite verb near end of sentence	
4	Noun phrase	
4	Personal pronoun	
4	Clumsy	Need to be recast
3	Missing word(s)	
3	Singular/plural confusion	
3	Existential(s)	
2	Unclear subject or no subject in sentence	
2	Incorrect punctuation	
2	Overstatement	
1	Unsuitable tone	Preaching
1	Subject-verb agreement	
1	Used plural for a mass noun	
1	Undefined term	

Table 4: Analysis of Article 3

Freq.	Nature of error	Comments
39	Clumsy	
34	Passive voice	

27	Tense	
23	Personal pronoun	
23	Incorrect word choice	
14	Incorrect or missing determiner(s)	Usually a determiner was missing, but in two cases the incorrect determiner was used.
12	Extra words	
11	Incorrect verb form(s)	Three of these were incorrect conjugations.
9	Incorrect punctuation	Missing commas or semicolons, incorrect use of colons. Two missing apostrophes.
9	Separate sentences that should be joined	
8	Noun phrase	
6	Missing words	Missing object or subject. Missing words such as “of” “which” “who” and “to.”
4	Sentences with no finite verb	Instead of a sentence, they were adjectival clauses.
5	Redundancy	
3	Existential(s)	
3	Singular-plural confusion	
2	Run-together sentence(s)	
2	Unsuitable tone	In one case, the tone was “preaching” and in the other it was very informal.
1	Subject-verb agreement	
1	Finite verb near end of sentence	
1	Placed full reference(s) in text	
1	Word order	This example clearly followed Indonesian.

Table 5: Analysis of Article 4

Freq.	Nature of error	Comments
50	Passive voice	
47	Clumsy	
41	Incorrect word choice	
32	Extra words	
16	Missing words	
16	Redundancy	
13	Incorrect verb form(s)	
11	Singular-plural confusion	
9	Noun phrase	
7	Tense	
6	Finite verb near end of sentence	
6	Incorrect or missing determiner(s)	
5	Incorrect punctuation	Extra or missing comma, used colon instead of semicolon
5	Separate sentences that should be joined	
2	Semantics	
1	Long sentence(s)	
1	Missing suffix	
1	Slang	
1	Subject-verb agreement	
1	Run-together sentence(s)	
1	Adverb instead of adjective	

Table 6: Analysis of Article 5

Freq.	Nature of error	Comments
78	Clumsy	
63	Incorrect word choice	

49	Passive voice	
18	Redundancy	
17	Tense	
14	Existential(s)	
12	Missing words	
12	Extra words	
10	Incorrect verb form(s)	
10	Singular-plural confusion	
6	Separate sentences that should be joined	
4	Finite verb near end of sentence	
3	Run-together sentence(s)	
3	Incorrect punctuation	Two missing commas, one extra comma
3	Semantics	
2	Personal pronoun	
2	Incorrect or missing determiner	
1	Noun phrase	Should be an adjective
1	Mood	
1	Preposition at end of sentence	
1	Subject-verb agreement	
1	Informal	
1	Word order	
1	Adjective form	
1	Verbiage	
1	Weak word(s)	
1	Placed full reference(s) in text	