

AN ANALYSIS OF GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL ERRORS IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' WRITING OF SIMPLE ENGLISH COPULAR SENTENCES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates on simple English copular sentences formed with subject plus was or were plus adjective and analyzes the grammatical and lexical errors found in junior high school students writing, identifying the most frequent error types. A descriptive qualitative design was employed with 64 eighth-grade students from SMP Negeri 3 Mlati as participants. The students worked in pairs to complete guided writing tasks, producing a total of 157 sentences. Each sentence was analyzed to determine whether it was correct or contained errors, and any errors were classified grammatical, lexical, and structural categories. The findings reveal that 82.2 percent of sentences were correct, showing that most students have a solid understanding of basic sentence construction. Nevertheless, errors were observed, especially in sentence structure, followed by grammar and vocabulary, highlighting areas requiring additional support. Frequent mistakes included missing prepositions, incorrect verb forms, and improper word order, reflecting difficulties in applying rules consistently. The study shows that collaborative writing exercises with targeted feedback can enhance students' writing accuracy. It provides insights for teachers to design focused practice and contributes to understanding how structured tasks improve junior high school students' English writing skills.

Keywords: *grammar errors; simple sentences; writing skills; english learning; junior high school students*

Writing is one of the essential skills in learning English because it allows students to communicate ideas, feelings, and information in an organized and meaningful form. Byrne (1988) states that writing is the ability to put thoughts into written symbols that can be understood by others. At the junior high school level, writing instruction usually begins with simple exercises that help students learn how to form basic English sentences. These early practices are important because they build the foundation for developing more advanced writing abilities such as composing descriptive and narrative texts (Rojas, 1968).

In classroom activities, one of the basic exercises given to students is writing simple sentences that describe a subject by using adjectives. This activity helps students recognize the use of the verb, to be, and different kinds of adjectives in a clear context. However, in practice, many students still find it difficult to construct grammatically correct sentences even after receiving explanations and examples from the teacher (eg., Alsalami, 2022; Rosadi, 2022). These difficulties can generally be grouped into three main aspects, namely grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure.

Grammar is a crucial element in forming correct sentences. Azar (1999) defines grammar as a system of rules that governs how words are combined to create meaningful expressions. In writing, students often struggle to apply grammatical rules correctly, especially when deciding which form of the verb to use with a particular subject. This situation shows that grammatical understanding still becomes an obstacle for many learners. Besides grammar, vocabulary is another important factor that supports writing ability. Nation (2001) explains that vocabulary knowledge includes the form, meaning, and use of words. Limited vocabulary often leads students to repeat the same adjectives or make spelling errors, which reduces both variety and accuracy in their writing. In addition, sentence structure also plays a vital role. Frank (1993) defines sentence structure as the arrangement of elements such as subject, predicate, object, and modifier that form a complete unit of meaning. Many students still produce errors related to word order, for example omitting articles or placing adjectives incorrectly.

Several studies have discussed students' grammatical errors in English writing. Kurniasari et al. (2019) found that high school students made many errors in using adjective phrases, particularly in the misformation category. Floranti and Adiantika (2019) reported that grammatical errors, especially in verb forms, were still common among English learners. At the junior high school level, Novelia and Faisal (2023) identified similar problems in students' use of noun phrases within descriptive texts, including misformation, omission, addition, and misordering. Although these studies provide useful insights, most of them focus on longer texts such as descriptive or narrative writing. Examining sentences at the basic level offers a clearer view of students' actual control of core grammatical patterns because it removes the influence of higher level writing demands such as organization and idea development. Only a few have examined students' difficulties in constructing simple English sentences, which actually form the basis for more complex writing. Previous studies tended to concentrate on identifying errors without presenting how many students were able to produce correct sentences, which limits the overall picture of students' performance.

The present study seeks to address that gap by analyzing grammatical errors found in junior high school students' writing of simple English sentences. The data were taken from the work of 56 students who wrote sentences in pairs, producing a total of 152 sentences. This study aims to identify the difficulties students face in writing simple sentences, to determine the most frequent types of errors. The findings are expected to provide practical input for English teachers in improving classroom instruction, particularly in teaching basic grammar and vocabulary for writing. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on sentence level analysis, which gives a clearer picture of students' grammatical competence at the beginning stage of writing development.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), descriptive qualitative research aims to present a detailed and accurate account of a phenomenon as it naturally occurs. The reason for choosing this method was that no experimental

intervention or treatment was involved; instead, the aim was to describe in detail the difficulties students face when writing simple English sentences, and to interpret the errors they produce in authentic classroom conditions. Through this design, the research was able to identify, classify, and interpret the types of grammatical, lexical, and structural errors in students' writing without manipulating learning conditions.

The participants were 56 eighth-grade students enrolled in classes VIII B and VIII D at SMP Negeri 3 Mlati, Sleman. These classes were selected to ensure homogeneity of instructional exposure, as both groups had received similar teaching materials and instruction in English grammar. Students were asked to work individually. Each student was given a writing task during class time to compose three to five simple English sentences reflecting previously taught grammatical patterns. After the teaching activity, 56 worksheets were collected from the students across 2 meetings. Each student submitted 1 worksheet in each meeting, resulting in a total of 56 worksheets. From these worksheets, 157 sentences were gathered and used as the primary data source for analysis.

The instrument used in this study was a writing worksheet designated as *Lembar Kerja Peserta Didik* (LKPD) 3C. This worksheet contained clear instructions for students to produce simple sentences in English following the teacher's model. The activity required collaboration between desk-mates, so that students could discuss word choice, grammatical form, and sentence structure while writing. The design of the instrument aimed to reflect authentic classroom practice while eliciting student errors in actual writing production.

Data collection took place during a regular English lesson. Each sentence on every worksheet was carefully transcribed into a digital record for analysis. The researcher ensured that the transcription was accurate, preserving misspellings, incorrect forms, and structural deviations. No additional qualitative instruments such as interviews or observations were used; the focus remained solely on written output as an indicator of students' performance under regular classroom conditions.

Data analysis was conducted in multiple stages. First, each sentence was examined carefully to identify deviations from standard English norms. Errors were identified without predefined categories to minimise bias during initial reading. Next, the identified errors were grouped into three categories, namely grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. The grammar category covered misuse of to be forms, incorrect tense, and agreement problems. The vocabulary category covered wrong spelling, inappropriate lexical choice, and inaccurate word form. The sentence structure category included errors in word order, omission or misuse of prepositions and articles, and other syntactic arrangement problems. After classification, the frequency of each error type was counted and converted into percentage values to allow comparison. Reliability in categorisation was maintained through the use of a coding checklist and by rechecking all coded items in multiple rounds of review. The trustworthiness of the analysis was strengthened by conducting intra rater checking and by ensuring that the final coding remained consistent with the established criteria. Examples of incorrect sentences and their corrected forms were added to illustrate typical patterns.

To establish the theoretical basis of the analysis, this study refers to Azar's view of grammar as the system of rules that governs how words may combine to form meaningful sentences (Azar, 1999). Vocabulary learning is interpreted through Nation's framework, which includes word form, meaning, and appropriate use in context (Nation, 2001). Sentence structure follows Frank's description of how the elements of a sentence are arranged to create a complete unit of meaning (Frank, 1993). While these three aspects often overlap in practice, this study uses

grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure as working categories to describe the specific errors that appear in students' copular sentences. This categorization is applied for clarity in presenting the findings and does not imply a rigid theoretical separation.

FINDINGS

Based on the data analysis, several types of errors were identified and classified into three main aspects: grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. The classification aims to show not only the kinds of difficulties the students experienced but also the level of their understanding of simple sentence patterns in English. The following table presents the distribution and examples of the errors found in students' writing.

Table 1. Classification of Students' Writing Results

Category	Number of Sentences	Percentage	Example of Error	Correction / Note
Grammar	9	5.7%	<i>He were happy. / My friend and I bored.</i>	→ <i>He was happy. / My friend and I were bored.</i>
Vocabulary	5	3.2%	<i>was neverous, I god and Jura ware proud for winning.</i>	→ <i>was nervous, I got a new bicycle, Fafa and Jura were proud of winning.</i>
Structure	14	8.9%	<i>Satria was excited go to beach. / Gary was shock Tiyo because extremly hurted.</i>	→ <i>Satria was excited to go to the beach. / Gary was shocked because Tiyo was extremely hurt.</i>
Correct	129	82.2%	<i>Reiva and Raiza were surprised. / Maria and the villagers were angry.</i>	Correct use of <i>subject + was/were + adjective</i>
Total	157	100%	—	—

The findings show that most students were able to construct grammatically correct simple sentences using the pattern subject plus was or were plus adjective. Out of 157 sentences, 129 or 82.2 percent were written correctly. This result suggests that the majority of students had already mastered the use of to be in simple descriptive sentences. The high proportion of correct sentences also indicates that students understood how to express feelings or conditions in English through basic grammatical structures. This outcome reflects the achievement of the basic competency in junior high school English learning, which focuses on the ability to write simple and meaningful sentences (Purnamasari et al., 2021).

Although the overall performance was satisfactory, a small number of errors were still found across the data. The grammatical aspect showed that nine sentences or 5.7 percent contained errors related to the incorrect use of *was* and *were* and inconsistencies in tense. For instance, several students wrote sentences such as *The pen were taken by Imam*, which should have been *was* since the subject is singular. There were also cases where students used the present tense verb *want* in a past tense context, which should have been *wanted*. These errors indicate that a few students still face difficulties in maintaining tense agreement. Muftah (2023) explained that such errors are common during the developmental stage of interlanguage when learners are still forming internal rules of the target language.

Vocabulary-related errors were relatively limited, appearing in only five sentences or 3.2 percent of the total. The mistakes included incorrect spelling and inappropriate word choice, such as *neverous* instead of *nervous* and *many* used without a following noun. Even though these mistakes were not frequent, they still affected the clarity of meaning and showed that students sometimes relied on phonetic spelling. Chan (2010) and Kirmizi and Karci (2017) emphasized that lexical errors often result from limited vocabulary knowledge and first language influence. The presence of such errors highlights the need for continuous vocabulary practice and exposure to correct written forms to enhance lexical accuracy.

The most common errors appeared in the structural aspect, which accounted for 14 sentences or 8.9 percent. The mistakes included missing prepositions, wrong infinitive forms, and incorrect word order. Examples include *go my home* instead of *go to my home* and *excited go to the beach* instead of *excited to go to the beach*. Such structural problems show that some students had not yet internalized the rules for constructing sentences that involve more complex elements. According to Corder (1967), structural errors reveal how learners develop hypotheses about language structure as they progress through different stages of learning. The students' tendency to omit function words and connectors suggests that they still needed more practice in sentence building beyond basic patterns.

In general, the percentage of correct sentences was much higher than the number of errors, which demonstrates that the students' ability to form simple English sentences was already strong. However, the errors that appeared remain significant because they reveal the specific areas where students still struggle. Teachers can use these findings to identify aspects that require reinforcement, such as verb agreement, prepositional use, and correct sentence sequencing. Focused instruction and corrective feedback are therefore essential to help students refine their writing competence and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

DISCUSSION

The overall findings of this study reveal that junior high school students generally possess an adequate understanding of how to construct simple English sentences following the pattern *subject plus was or were plus adjective*. This achievement is a positive indicator of grammatical progress at the basic level of English education. The ability to produce sentences with the correct form of *to be* and *adjective* suggests that students have developed early awareness of English sentence structure. This aligns with Harmer's (2007) view about learning grammar through contextualized writing tasks that helps students form a mental framework for accurate language production. The high proportion of correct sentences suggests that classroom instruction has contributed to the development of foundational grammatical competence among the students, although their performance may also be shaped by additional factors such as prior exposure to English, individual learning motivation, and opportunities for independent practice.

The mastery of simple sentence patterns can be interpreted as evidence that students are transitioning from controlled to more autonomous use of English grammar. Abadikhah (2012) explained that learners progress from mechanical practice toward meaningful use as they internalize language rules. The students' accuracy may be partly influenced by how clearly the prompt directed them to write simple sentences within a limited grammatical focus. This allowed them to concentrate on the basic form without being pulled into broader communicative demands, a condition that can support accuracy as suggested by Storch (2001). This outcome supports the principle of scaffolding in second language learning, in which gradual exposure to structured language tasks helps learners achieve independence in writing. It also reflects that the combination of repetition and contextual examples can significantly improve grammatical retention among adolescent learners.

Despite the overall accuracy, the presence of errors in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure reveals that students' understanding is not yet complete. The grammatical mistakes involving *was* and *were* indicate partial mastery of subject–verb agreement. According to Ellis (2015), these kinds of errors are developmental and represent interlanguage stages where learners are still formulating internalized language rules. The findings, therefore, suggest that instruction should focus not only on correction but also on developing students' awareness of why certain forms are appropriate. Teaching grammar through reflection and metalinguistic explanation could help bridge the gap between knowledge and application (Fontich & García-Folgado, 2018; Watson & Newman, 2017). This aligns with the communicative grammar approach, which helps learners notice how grammatical forms function in meaningful contexts rather than memorizing rules in isolation. Research shows that noticing form–meaning patterns is central to grammar learning (Davis, 2015) and that form-focused work embedded in communicative activities strengthens learners' understanding of grammatical choices (Ellis, 2008).

The occurrence of tense-related errors also sheds light on students' conceptual difficulties with time reference in English. Many students are accustomed to Indonesian temporal expressions, which rely more on adverbs than verb inflection. Consequently, they often overlook the need to adjust verb forms to match time frames. Nikouee and Oba (2025) emphasized that tense mastery requires repeated practice within meaningful contexts to ensure accurate form–function mapping. This finding implies that grammar exercises should integrate situational contexts, such as describing past experiences or events, to strengthen students' sense of tense and aspect in English. Repetition combined with meaningful use will allow learners to internalize grammatical regularities more naturally.

Lexical errors, though less frequent, provide valuable insights into students' vocabulary development. The data revealed instances of misspelling and inappropriate word choices, suggesting that learners rely heavily on auditory memory rather than visual exposure. Richards (1976) and Schmitt (1995) observed that lexical competence involves both knowledge of word form and knowledge of appropriate usage. The errors in this study reflect limited lexical input and insufficient reading exposure, which hinder students from recognizing correct spellings. Strengthening vocabulary instruction through reading activities, spelling games, and contextual tasks could help address this gap. Nation (2001) also emphasized that repeated exposure to words in context contributes significantly to long-term lexical retention and accuracy.

The most frequent errors occurred in the structural aspect, which points to challenges in syntactic awareness. Missing prepositions, incorrect infinitive forms, and misplaced adjectives demonstrate that some students have not yet mastered how words function together in a sentence. Corder (1967) regarded such structural errors as developmental evidence of learners' attempts to

construct their own linguistic systems. Instead of viewing them as mere deficiencies, teachers should interpret them as signs of progress that reveal learners' hypotheses about English syntax. Targeted instruction on word order and function words, combined with contrastive analysis between English and Indonesian structures, could help students overcome these challenges and refine their sentence-building skills. This assertion is supported by studies that demonstrate how analysing syntactic differences between L1 and L2 reveals common learner difficulties (Uktolseja et al., 2019), and how word-order awareness is crucial for processing and comprehension in second language contexts (Slioussar & Harchevnik, 2024).

The differences between this study and previous research are also worth noting. While Kurniasari et al. (2019) found that high school students committed misformation errors in adjective phrases, and Novelia and Faisal (2023) identified noun phrase errors at the junior high level, the present study found structural errors to be the most dominant. This divergence may stem from the differing levels of writing complexity analyzed. Previous studies examined full descriptive or narrative texts, whereas this study focused on isolated sentences. Focusing on sentence-level writing appears to allow for higher accuracy because learners can concentrate their cognitive resources on grammar rather than on discourse organization, a pattern supported by research showing that sentence-level practice reduces cognitive load and improves syntactic accuracy (Carvalhais et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the pedagogical importance of beginning writing instruction at the sentence level before moving on to more extended texts.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which states that comprehensible input and meaningful practice are essential for acquisition. The high percentage of correct sentences indicates that students have been exposed to adequate input through instruction and examples. However, the persistence of errors suggests that additional output-based activities, as proposed by Gass and Madden (1985), are necessary to push learners toward greater accuracy. The combination of input and output processes creates a balanced learning environment in which students both absorb and produce language actively. This theoretical interpretation emphasizes that successful writing development requires interactive and reflective engagement with language.

The findings also have implications for assessment and feedback practices. Teachers should provide diagnostic feedback that categorizes errors by type and frequency rather than offering general corrections. Ferris (2011) asserted that focused written feedback helps learners recognize recurring patterns of error and develop strategies to self-correct. In this study, structural and grammatical mistakes could serve as focal points for future classroom interventions. Moreover, integrating peer feedback sessions could reinforce students' awareness of linguistic accuracy while promoting collaborative learning values. Feedback that is formative and dialogic in nature can transform error correction into an opportunity for reflection and deeper learning.

Pedagogically, this research underscores the value of combining form-focused instruction with communicative practice. As the students demonstrated good command of simple patterns, teachers should gradually introduce more complex structures without sacrificing accuracy. Language instruction must balance fluency and form to achieve long-term proficiency (Daskan & Yildiz, 2020; El-dakhs, 2015; Nation, 2007). Encouraging students to use adjectives in varied sentence types, such as comparative and superlative forms, could expand their syntactic repertoire while maintaining grammatical control. The integration of meaningful tasks and continuous feedback can ensure that learners progress from simple to more advanced writing with confidence.

Finally, the findings contribute to a broader understanding of how Indonesian learners develop basic English writing competence. The tendency to perform better in controlled sentence

writing but weaker in structural complexity reflects a transitional stage common among EFL learners. The results affirm that systematic instruction emphasizing clarity, repetition, and reflection yields significant improvement in accuracy. This study also demonstrates that analyzing not only errors but also correct outputs provides a more holistic view of learners' capabilities. By highlighting both strengths and weaknesses, teachers and researchers can design instructional models that nurture balanced language growth, leading to more effective English learning outcomes in junior high school contexts.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that junior high school students have generally acquired the ability to construct grammatically correct English sentences following the basic pattern of subject plus was or were plus adjective. The accuracy rate of over eighty percent demonstrates that students are able to internalize fundamental sentence patterns and apply them with reasonable consistency. While this may reflect the effectiveness of the English instruction provided at the secondary level, other factors such as prior exposure to English, individual motivation, or supplementary learning outside the classroom may also have influenced students performance. Nevertheless, the remaining errors, particularly those involving sentence structure and word choice, underline the fact that grammatical mastery at the sentence level is still developing and requires further pedagogical reinforcement. Such findings suggest that while explicit teaching of grammar remains essential, continuous exposure and contextualized practice are equally necessary for sustaining long-term accuracy and fluency.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study provides empirical support for the interactionist view of language acquisition which posits that learning occurs through the dynamic relationship between input, output, and feedback. The dominance of accurate sentences implies that learners have benefited from adequate comprehensible input as proposed by Krashen (1982), while the persistence of certain errors suggests that output-based activities, as advocated by Gass and Madden (1985), need to be intensified. The results also align with Ellis (2008) who argued that grammatical competence emerges gradually through meaningful practice and reflection rather than through isolated rule memorization. Hence, this study reinforces the importance of integrating explicit grammar instruction with communicative activities that allow learners to test hypotheses about language form in authentic contexts. This theoretical implication emphasizes that grammatical accuracy does not develop in isolation but in conjunction with opportunities for negotiation of meaning and corrective feedback within the learning environment.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are equally significant. Teachers should recognize that while students can produce simple correct sentences, they still require targeted support in refining structural and lexical aspects. Focused feedback on prepositions, word order, and infinitive constructions can help reduce recurring errors and promote deeper grammatical awareness. Therefore, writing instruction at the junior high level should move beyond repetition drills toward process-oriented learning that incorporates peer review, sentence reconstruction, and guided individual practice. Moreover, the curriculum should provide opportunities for contextualized writing tasks where grammar functions as a tool for communication rather than an isolated component. This approach can foster both linguistic accuracy and meaningful language use, which are crucial for students' future academic development.

This study has several limitations. First the analysis focused exclusively on isolated sentence writing which may not fully represent learners performance in longer and more complex texts. Second the sample was limited to one junior high school which restricts the generalizability

of the findings. Future research could expand the scope by including multiple schools, cross-grade comparisons, and more complex written tasks. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine how consistent feedback and sustained practice influence the development of grammatical accuracy over time.

In a broader perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on learner errors by providing empirical data on Indonesian EFL students' grammatical performance in basic sentence writing. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on error types or frequency, this research highlights the proportion of correct usage, offering a more balanced picture of students' actual competence. The study advances current understanding by demonstrating that the majority of learners have achieved control over elementary grammar but still struggle with structural cohesion and lexical precision. It is therefore recommended that future studies expand the scope of analysis to include more complex sentence types, longer written texts, and cross-grade comparisons. Longitudinal research could also provide insight into how consistent feedback and continuous practice shape the development of grammatical accuracy over time. Ultimately, the findings of this research affirm that mastery of simple sentence structures serves as a strong foundation for more advanced writing skills and that effective grammar instruction must combine theoretical understanding, reflective practice, and sustained engagement with authentic language use.

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