

EFL University Students' Errors in Constructing Complex Sentences in Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing in academic purposes becomes a big challenge for EFL students since they are required to produce their S1 thesis as one of the fulfillments to graduate from their study. In this academic writing, using different types of sentences as one of its characteristics is often found difficult for the students to construct, especially in constructing complex sentences related to the dependent clauses: *noun clauses, adjectives clauses, and adverb clauses*. The difficulties can be seen from the errors produced in the complex sentences used in the academic writing. This paper aims to find out the English Language and Literature Department students' errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing at Universitas Negeri Padang. This is a descriptive study, and it describes the detail analysis of the students' errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing. The final projects of the students taken from four classes were used as the source of the data of this study. In this preliminary stage study, 16 academic writings of the students were chosen by using the proportional random sampling technique. The data were analyzed by using the theory of error classification proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). This study revealed 129 omission errors (57%), 55 addition errors (24%), 42 misformation errors (19%), and 1 misordering error (0.4%). Based on the errors found, it can be interpreted that the English Language and Literature Department students who have taken Academic Writing Course at Universitas Negeri Padang still have lack of competence in constructing complex sentences.

Keywords: *EFL University Students' Errors, Complex Sentences, Academic Writing*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the level of education, especially in the university level, academic writing competence is a primary skill that should be mastered by students. Clearly, the students are really expected to put the results of their studies in international journals after writing their S1 thesis. Those studies are of course really useful for the development of education especially in English teaching in the future. As college students, their ability in writing academically has been gained through five writing subjects: *Paragraph Writing, Essay Writing, Academic Writing, Article Writing, and Paper Thesis Writing* courses. It is proved that they have trained to be able to write scientifically before producing a thesis as one of the requirements to get their bachelor degree.

Obviously, there are some criteria indicating that the students have the ability to write scientifically. Lane and Lange [1], Solikhah [2], Husin and Nurbayani [3] have proposed some guidelines that must be paid attention when coming to academic writing. Those are avoiding using informal language, contractions, the subject "you", the use of etc., so on, and so forth, and avoiding asking direct questions,. Then, it is suggested

to use passive voice, sentence types, words for the strength of the ideas, and single word verb for formality of writing and its clarity. In addition, Rooyen and Jordaan [4] argue that syntactically, the understanding of complex sentences is one aspect of language for academic purposes. It means that the ability to write complex sentences in academic writing must be gained by students to fulfill a good academic writing as the fact that varying using the types of sentences is one of characteristics of academic writing that has been explained previously. Writing ideas in complex sentences will make the ideas flow more smoothly compared to writing the ideas in other types of sentences [5]. Allowing students to emphasize their important idea in the independent clause in a sentence is reason to use this type of sentence in academic writing. However, generally using sentence variety will show the quality and eyes-catch of writing [2]. Therefore, it indicates that mastering complex sentences by students in academic writing is considerably important.

Werner and Nelson [6], Haryani and Fatimah [7] define a complex sentence as a sentence that contains at least an independent clause and a dependent clause. In other words, the independent clause plays as the main

clause in the sentence. Definitely, the two different clauses in the sentence are combined by using a variety of connecting words. The connecting words used in this type of sentence vary based on the dependent clause that follows them. In fact, in complex sentences there are three primary kinds of dependent clauses: adjective clauses, adverb clauses, and noun clauses [8, 9, 6].

Focusing on using the types of sentences in organizing ideas in academic writing, constructing complex sentences often give some problems for students. Royen and Jordan [4] found that most of the students are in the middle level of the comprehension in complex sentence. Syarif [10] admitted that it is really difficult for the students to construct well complex sentences because they are lack of knowledge of grammatical structure. Then, Qonitatur [11] found that skipping the lesson of types of sentences including complex sentences by teachers is the problem of students in constructing complex sentences well. Discussing the theory of complex sentences briefly is also one of the problems. A study conducted by Subekti [12] revealed that the students have low mastery of complex sentences containing multiple clause structures even though they were good in mastering complex sentences containing noun clauses, adjective clauses, and adverb clauses Fitriwati and Oktavia [13] found that from all of the topics learned in Grammar 3 Course, complex sentences become one of the most problems faced by the students. Continually, Subekti [5] conducted a study about an error analysis in complex sentences made by EFL students revealing that the students' mastery of complex sentences was generally quite low.

Those problems above can be seen from the types of errors they commit, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen [14] proposed an error classification theory known as Surface Strategy Taxonomy. This theory classifies the errors into four types of errors: *omission*, *addition*, *misformation*, and *misordering*. Omission errors mean a phenomenon which students omit one element that must be presented in the sentence. It can be said that one of the parts of speech is absence in the sentence. For example, there is an absence of verb in a sentence. Addition errors are the opposite of the omission errors which mean there is an element or more presented in the sentence that must not be presented, for instance, the presence of an article in a sentence. Misformation errors are a phenomenon which students use the wrong form of an element or part of speech in a sentence. Lastly, misordering errors are a phenomenon which students write a sentence in a wrong order.

Dealing with the errors, it was also found in the students' academic essay in organizing ideas in complex sentences in 2016/2017 academic year. Based on the

preliminary research done in students' academic essays in Academic writing Course in 2016/2017 Academic year, it was found that students produce errors in constructing complex sentences For example, *There are some general skills of English language that they should be know and understand such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing*. Based on this sentence, there are some errors that are found: errors of *omission* and *addition*. The *omission error* can be seen on the word *skill* that should be written to be *skills*. The *addition error* can be seen on the word *be* that should not appear in the sentence. Werner and Nelson [6], Solikhah [2] wrote that there are some problems commonly found by students in writing complex sentences: comma splices, run-on sentences, and fragments (incomplete clauses and dependent clauses). For this reason, analyzing the students' errors is important to know their problems and to improve their ability in constructing complex sentences as one of the characteristics of academic writing.

Since analyzing students' errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing is important, conducting the current study more deeply in other aspects of the structures of complex sentences needs to be conducted. Hence, this study focused not only on the three types of the dependent clauses / incomplete clauses (fragments), but also on the multiple-clause structures, comma splices, and run-on sentences. The complex sentences were seen on its six types: complex sentences with adjective clauses, noun clauses, adverb clauses, multiple-clause structures, comma splices, and run-on sentences in the students' academic essays in Academic Writing Course.

This research is considerably important to be conducted because writing in complex sentences always becomes one of the biggest problems of EFL students even in the university level who are from English and Language Literature Department. The complexity of organizing ideas in complex sentences always confuses the students to construct this type of sentence. However, varying the types of sentences in writing, especially using complex sentences, will enhance students' writing quality in academic field. Hence, analyzing the students' errors in constructing complex sentences is really expected to reduce the errors and give an important feedback for the lecturers to improve students' academic writing competence in constructing complex sentences to prepare them to produce their final project which is thesis to get their bachelor degree and to put the results of their research in the international journal.

2. METHODS

This is a descriptive study, and it describes the detail analysis of the students' errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing. The final projects of the English language and Literature Department students in Academic Writing Course taken from four classes were used as the source of the data of this study. In this preliminary stage study, 16 academic writings of the students were chosen by using the proportional random sampling technique. The data were the students' errors in constructing complex sentences analyzed by using the theory of error classification known as Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen [14]. The errors were classified into four categories: *omission*, *addition*, *misformation*, and *misordering*. Then, the errors found were put in the table of error classification. After getting the number of errors for each type and the number of all errors, the types of errors were calculated. The types of errors collected were calculated based on the formula proposed by Bungin [15] as stated below:

$$N = \frac{fx}{n} \times 100\%$$

N = The types of errors percentage

fx = Number of errors for each type

n = Number of all errors

100% = Constant Numeral

The percentage of the types of errors found in constructing complex sentences in the students' academic essays was interpreted by explaining the characteristics of the types of errors.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the data collection, there were 151 complex sentences containing errors found in 16 academic essays of the students of English Department at Universitas Negeri Padang who have taken Academic Writing Course. Based on these complex sentences, there were 96 sentences containing omission errors, 44 sentences containing addition errors, 41 sentences containing misformation errors, and one sentence containing misordering errors. The following were several examples of the types of students' errors in constructing complex sentences in writing academic essays based on the theory of Surface Strategy Taxonomy:

a. Omission Errors

This type of errors is a phenomenon in which an element is absence in a sentence that must be presented in the sentence. Based on the data collection, it was found that there were 129 omission errors contained in 96 sentences. In other words, there were more than one omission error occurred in a sentence. Moreover, in this

research there were four aspects of omission produced by the students: *verb auxiliaries*, *noun and verb inflections*, *relative pronouns/conjunctions*, and *comma*. Other aspects of omission were article, noun, pronoun, and preposition, but the errors related to those aspects were not many as the five aspects before. The following data were presented based on the samples of omission errors committed by the students.

1. Omission of verb auxiliaries

Verb auxiliaries are put after subject in an independent clause or after relative clauses / conjunctions in the dependent clause in a complex sentence. The student's sentence below include in the omission of verb auxiliaries.

Student's sentence no 29: Because of that, they gave opinion and did some researches to find the difficulties of listening comprehension that commonly experienced by learners.

Correct sentence no 29: Because of that, they gave opinion and did some researches to find the difficulties of listening comprehension that are commonly experienced by learners.

2. Omission of noun and verb inflections

Noun and verb inflections can happen in complex sentences. Noun inflections happen when students are confused to identify whether the noun is singular or plural. Verb inflections happen when students are confused about the use of past participle in regular verbs and verb-ing. The student's sentences below contain the omission of noun and verb inflections.

Student's sentence no 32: Meanwhile, there are only 11 students who think that cultural differences is one of the aspect that can affect their listening ability. Correct sentence no 32: Meanwhile, there are only 11 students who think that cultural differences are one of the aspects that can affect their listening ability.

Student's sentence no 43: Johnson (1956: 414) mention that watching movies in foreign language give benefits for students.....

Correct sentence no 43: Johnson (1956: 414) mentions that watching movies in foreign language give benefits for students.....

3. Omission of relatives pronouns/ conjunctions

Relative pronouns are used depends on the things before the adjective clauses: animal and things,

people, place, possessive, reason, and time. In adverb clauses and noun clauses, conjunctions used are known as subordinating conjunctions that vary. The student's sentence below contains the omission of relatives pronouns/ conjunctions.

Student's sentence no 6: In another study has been done by Weir (2007), examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension on L2 learners in Japan.

Correct sentence no 6: Another study that has been done by Weir (2007), he examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension on L2 learners in Japan.

4. Omission of comma

Comma used in complex sentences aims to connect an independent clause and a dependent clause or more and it contains subordinating conjunctions. The student's sentence below contains the omission of comma.

Student's sentence no 36: If students does not have all of those problems it means that they do not have difficulties in listening comprehension.

Correct sentence no 36: If students does not have all of those problems, it means that they do not have difficulties in listening comprehension.

b. Addition Errors

This type of errors is the opposite of omission errors. It is a phenomenon in which an element presented in a sentence that must not be presented in the sentence. Based on the data collection, it was found that there were 55 addition errors contained in 44 sentences. In other words, there were more than one addition error occurred in a sentence. Moreover, in this research there were two common aspects of addition produced by the students: *comma* and *conjunctions*. Other aspects of addition were noun and verb inflections, but the errors related to those aspects were not many as the aspects before. The following data were presented based on the samples of addition errors committed by the students.

1. Addition of comma

Comma used in complex sentences aims to connect an independent clause and a dependent clause or more and it contains subordinating conjunctions. However, in this case, the students put too much comma that must not be presented in the sentence. The student's sentence below contains the addition of comma.

Student's sentence no 5: According to Wagner

(2006) who examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, found that there is a relationship between these two variables.

Correct sentence no 5: Wagner (2006) who examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension found that there is a relationship between these two variables.

2. Addition of conjunctions

Conjunctions in complex sentences are divided into two types: *relative pronouns* for adjective clauses and *subordinating conjunctions* for adverb and noun clauses. The student's sentence below contains the addition of conjunctions.

Student's sentence no 53: According to Adam (1993), who defined journalism as a form of expression used to report and comment in the public media on events and ideas, a product of individual journalists and the culture in which they work, always marked by five "principles of design."

Correct sentence no 53: Adam (1993) defined journalism as a form of expression used to report and comment in the public media on events and ideas, a product of individual journalists and the culture in which they work, always marked by five "principles of design."

c. Misformation Errors

This type of errors is a phenomenon in which an element has a wrong form in a sentence. Based on the data collection, it was found that there were 42 misformation errors contained in 41 sentences. In other words, there were more than one misformation error occurred in a sentence. Moreover, in this research there were three aspects of misformation produced by the students: *verb auxiliaries* and *action verbs*. Other aspects of misformation were noun, punctuation, and preposition but the errors related to those aspects were not many as the aspects before. The following data were presented based on the samples of misformation errors committed by the students.

1. Misformation of verb auxiliaries

The student's sentence below contains the misformation of verb auxiliaries.

Student's sentence no 25: In this paper, the author did a research about students' problems in listening comprehension and also gives strategies to overcome the problems that students have that is related to their problems in listening comprehension.

Correct sentence no 25: In this paper, the author did a research about students' problems in listening comprehension and also gave strategies to overcome the problems that students have that **are** related to their problems in listening comprehension.

2. Misformation of action verbs

The student's sentence below contains the misformation of action verbs.

Student's sentence no 119: M. Furqon Hidayatullah (in Sari, 2017) say that the word "character" came from Latin that means chiseled.

Correct sentence no 119: M. Furqon Hidayatullah (in Sari, 2017) says that the word "character" comes from Latin that means chiseled.

d. Misordering Errors

This type of errors is a phenomenon in which a sentence is not organized well. In other words, the sentence is arranged in the wrong order. Based on the data collection, it was found that there was only one misordering error contained in one complex sentence. The following datum was presented based on the sample of misordering errors committed by the students. The student's sentence below contains the misordering error.

Student's sentence no 112: When the students listen to the song in the class, it can make the interesting atmosphere.

Correct sentence no 112: When the students listen to the song in the class, it can make the atmosphere interesting.

From the data analysis above, it was known that the students made all of the four types of errors proposed by Dulay et al [14]. The sequence of the types of errors made by the students was omission errors, addition errors, misformation errors, and misordering errors. It can be seen in the Table. 1 below shows the percentages of students' errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing.

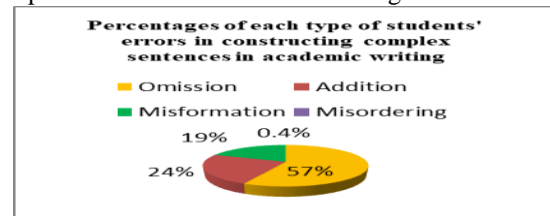
Table 1. Percentages of Students' Errors in Constructing Complex Sentences in Academic Writing

Types of Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage s of Errors
Omission	129	57%
Addition	55	24%
Misformation	42	19%
Misordering	1	0.4%
Total	227	100%

Based on the table above, it can be seen that the students of English Department at Universitas Negeri Padang did 227 errors in total. There were 129 omission errors (57%), 55 addition errors (24%), 42 misformation errors (19%), and 1 misordering error (0.4%). Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the highest occurrence of types of errors made by the students is omission errors consisting of 128 errors and the lowest occurrence was misordering errors consisting of one error.

The chart below shows the percentages of students' errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing.

Chart 1. Percentages of students' errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing.



Based on the chart above, it is seen that the highest percentage of types of errors made by the students was omission errors (57%) and the lowest percentage was misordering errors (0.4%). This results were quite different from the results found by Hendrawaty [16]. She found that the highest percentage of errors was misformation errors (57,6%) and the lowest percentage was misordering errors (6,13%). However, she did not only concern about the complex sentences, but also other types of sentences: simple sentences, compound sentences, and compound-complex sentences. Nevertheless, from all of these types of sentences, complex sentences often become a major problems.

However, the errors found in this study did not merely focus on the dependent clauses of the complex sentences. Those errors found were also related to the sentence fragments (incomplete sentence), run on sentences, and comma splices. Related to sentence fragments, it was mostly found that there was an absence of predicate (verb auxiliaries or action verb) in a sentence. It can be seen in the omission of verb auxiliary or action verb part that has been explained.

Another error found was related to comma splices. There were some complex sentences that have comma, but there is no any relative clause or subordinating conjunctions put there. It is supported by the study conducted by Haryani and Fatimah [7]. They found that students get difficulties in choosing the appropriate subordinating conjunctions in combining ideas in writing. It can be seen in the sentence "There

are many media can use to improve listening skills, one of them is watching movie.” This sentence should be written to be “There are many media that can be used to improve listening skills, one of them is watching movie.” From this sentence, it also can be known that the problem is not only the use of conjunctions, but also the construction of passive voice form in the complex sentence. Obviously, the use of the conjunctions is really important because it determines the meaning of the sentence.

Overall, the students lack knowledge of the structure of the complex sentences including the passive voice forms in this type of sentence. Even though they have knowledge about this type of sentences, they still cannot organize their ideas well in complex sentence patterns. These problems are supported by Solikhah [2] that complex sentences as one of sentence types are commonly long and complicated because using slang and constructions are avoided even though plain vocabularies are still allowed. Qonitatun [11], Ahmed (17) also supported that it happens because students seldom practice their knowledge that they have obtained in the classroom Thus, many practices need to be done by students so that the errors will be decreased.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings above, it can be concluded that the EFL students of English Department at Universitas Negeri Padang who have taken Academic Writing Course made the four types of errors in constructing complex sentences in academic writing. The sequence of the types of errors made by the students from the highest to the lowest was omission errors, addition errors, misformation errors, and misordering errors. Moreover, more than one types of errors occurred in one sentence. These errors often found in student complex sentences containing passive voice even though sometimes these errors also occurred in complex sentences that have more than one dependent clauses. Then, the students produce long complex sentences, so they lose control of it. Thus, it indicates that the students find difficulties in organizing ideas in complex sentences. As a matter of fact, the students need to build their awareness of making these errors and do more practices in constructing complex sentences so that the errors can be decreased. In another side, lecturers need to emphasize more in allowing the students to practice using this type of sentences because writing in academic purposes is often difficult for students even in the university level. Gaining the students’ competence in constructing complex sentences will prepare them to have better academic written

production for their thesis and the publication of their results in an international journals.

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