

INVESTIGATING ERRORS IN WRITING MECHANICS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

Besides grammar, writing mechanics are one of important components for producing an effective piece of writing. This study has attempted to explain the types and the most frequent type of errors in writing mechanics found in essays produced by the second semester students of English Department of Universitas Airlangga year 2018/2019. Steps of Error Analysis explained in Gass and Selinker (2008) and the classification of errors by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) were adopted in this study. The data were collected from 51 typed essays of division and classification written by the semester-two students. The study found in the essays 686 errors in three writing mechanics: punctuation (368), capitalization (291) and spelling (27). The errors belong to four types: addition (271), omission (269), misformation (139), and misordering (7). The two categories combined, the most frequent errors were in the addition of capitalization (211), followed by the omission of commas (160). The findings indicate that capitalization and punctuation become a writing problem for many student participants of this study. Therefore, the problem needs to be dealt with as writing mechanics help make the message in writing conveyed more clearly.

Keywords: Error Analysis, essays, types of error, writing mechanics

INTRODUCTION

The importance of writing mechanics like punctuation has been acknowledged for long time (Stewart & Grobe, 1979; Lyons, 1987). Punctuation marks are not simply symbols supplementary to a language but are meaningful (Stone & Ford, 2017) and their function is more semantic than grammatical (Houghton, Upadhyay, & Klin, 2018). Rice (2008) even asserts that to be successful in the 21st century teachers and writers need to be good at writing mechanics, along with the technical knowhow.

Despite their central role in communication, writing mechanics have not been much researched. Among the existing studies, most looked at one or two aspects of writing mechanics, which are punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Shokouhi and Zadeh-Dabbagh (2009), for instance, investigated punctuation and spelling found in learners' writing. Other studies focused only on one aspect: Bestgen and Granger (2011) and Albeshir (2018) analyzed spelling errors in second language writing, while Salman, Estefan and Yaseen (2017) examined punctuation errors found in scientific writing. In the local context, the general picture is similar: most studies focused on either one aspect of two aspects of writing mechanics (Nurhayati, 2014; Nasrudin, 2015; Hikmah, 2017). Therefore, more research is necessary to compare the uses of punctuation, spelling and capitalization in writing, particularly in the context of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL).

Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling have been found to be problems for many ESL/EFL learners (Almukhaizeem, 2013; Manzolim & Gumpal, 2015; Wu & Garza, 2014). This may relate to the fact that compared to other skills, writing is more complex the most challenging skill to be mastered by EFL learners. Producing a good piece of writing is hard not only for non-native but also for native speakers (Cheung, 2016). At university level, the establishment of good writing skills by the students are crucial as they are expected to be able to write varied academic texts. To produce good writing, the students need to concern not only with the grammar, word choices and sentence variations, but also punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, which are usually called writing mechanics.

Punctuation marks, capitalization, and spelling are important aspects that contribute to meaningful writing (Shweba & Mujiyanto, 2017, p. 93). It is essential to use writing mechanics properly in writing since they can make a sentence or paragraph easy to read, which in turns will lead to a better understanding of the message conveyed. Correct and appropriate use of writing mechanics can improve the quality of a text and give a good impression towards the writer (Harmer, 2004, p. 34). In EFL teaching and learning contexts, particularly in Indonesia, most learners tend to focus more on grammar since grammar is the taught topic starting from junior high school level to university level. This focus could lead to the neglect of writing mechanics by the learners and by teachers. The fact that grammar exists both in spoken

and written form of English, while mechanics only appear in the written form, may also cause the less concern of writing mechanics.

Writing, particularly at university level, mostly deals with constructing texts for academic purposes. Students are usually taught how to write different types of essay, including process essays, division-classification essays, comparison-contrast essays, cause-effect essays, and problem solution essays. Brandon and Brandon (2011, p. 82), for instance, stated that an essay is a group of paragraphs each of which has the function of supporting a controlling idea called the thesis. An essay consists in three main parts, which are introduction, body, and conclusion. First, the introduction of an essay is the first paragraph that provides some background information (general discussion) on the subject and states the main idea in a thesis statement, which is usually stated in the last sentence. Second, the body consists of supporting paragraphs that explain and support the thesis. Third, the conclusion is the final paragraph of an essay whose purpose is to summarize the main points in the essay without repeating the same words.

A focus on the structure, or how an essay is organized, and usually also on the content, can also overlook discussion and practice of writing mechanics on the part of students. Therefore, the students may often commit errors in punctuation marks, capitalization, and spelling when they are required to an essay. Such errors can obstruct a full understanding of the message contained in the essay. In this respect, analyzing errors made by the students is of great importance since the result can be used by both teachers and students as a reference to evaluate the learning and teaching process. Error Analysis (EA) offers ways to explore errors made by learners. EA has become a significant tool for language teachers to revisit their teaching strategies for dealing with the errors their students have made.

EA is a linguistic analysis focusing on the errors made by learners in the target language (TL), then compared with forms in the TL (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 102). Meanwhile, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen emphasized three main contributions of ER: raising theoretical awareness, fostering attention to varied sources of learners' errors, and making errors have "the relatively special status" in the language teaching arena (1982, p. 141). Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 184) summarize the purposes of EA as follows: identifying learners' strategies in learning a language, attempting to find out

causes of learner errors, and gaining information about common problems in language learning necessary for developing teaching materials and strategies.

To analyze learner errors, there are several steps offered by Error Analysis in the process. Gass and Selinker (2008) proposed six steps for conducting EA, which are collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analyzing sources of errors, and providing a remedy. In this study, however, only the first four steps were taken. The other two steps, analyzing sources of errors and remediating, were beyond the aim of this present study to identify and classify errors in writing mechanics. To classify the identified errors, this study used Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) that includes addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. The identification of errors was conducted by referring to the rules of punctuation and capitalization by Straus (2008) and Oshima and Hogue (2007).

The following table summarizes the details of writing mechanics and types of errors to be analyzed.

Table 1 Writing Mechanics Errors Classification

Types of Error	Writing Mechanics		
Addition	Punctuation: period, comma, semicolon, colon, question mark, exclamation point, quotation mark, parentheses, apostrophes, ellipsis, hyphens, and dash.	Capitalization	Spelling
Omission			
Misformation			
Misordering			

METHODOLOGY

The data of this study consisted of 51 typed essays of division and classification produced by 51 students, selected from two classes of Basic Essay Writing course of the 2018/2019 academic year. The essays were products of an assignment given by the lecturers of the two classes. Offered to the second semester students, Basic Essay Writing is one of writing courses at the English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga. The analysis was focused on the writing mechanics that include punctuation, capitalization, and spelling in the collected essays. To identify errors in writing mechanics, the researchers read each of the collected essays two to three times. The identification resulted in 686 errors in writing mechanics in the essays. Furthermore, to classify the types of the identified errors, the researchers adopted

Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), which covers addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. Quantifying the errors in the use of writing mechanics was also conducted to identify the number of error occurrences in each type and aspect.

DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, the study found 686 errors in the use of writing mechanics in the essays. The errors occur to the three aspects of writing mechanics: punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, and all types of errors are found: addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. The summary of the results is presented in the following table.

Table 2 Aspects and Number of Writing Mechanics Errors

Types of Writing Mechanics Errors	Addition	Omission	Misformation	Misordering	Total
Punctuation:					
1. Period	6	10	7	2	25
2. Comma	26	160	105	3	294
3. Colon	3	1	2	-	6
4. Semicolon	5	5	7	-	17
5. Apostrophe	12	2	-	-	14
6. Quotation Marks	-	1	-	-	1
7. Hyphen	-	-	11	-	11
Capitalization	211	80	-	-	291
Spelling	8	10	7	2	27
TOTAL	271	269	139	7	686

Table 2 shows that the errors appear in each aspect of writing mechanics: punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Of 12 punctuation marks proposed by Straus (2008), seven undergo errors in use. They are period, comma, colon, semicolon, apostrophe, quotation marks, and hyphen. The description regarding the types of writing mechanics errors is given in the following sections. However, since there are many instances of the writing mechanics errors, the researchers only discuss some that represent the types of error.

Addition Errors

Based on the data, addition errors occur to the three aspects of writing mechanics investigated in this study. Thus, addition errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are found in the students' essays. An addition error in punctuation occurs when an unnecessary quotation mark is included in a phrase or sentence. In capitalization, lowercases are capitalized or written in uppercase. An addition error in spelling occurs when there is an addition of a letter within a word. Examples of such errors are as follows:

Table 3 Examples of Addition Errors

No.	The Error	Suggested Revision
3.1	<i>For example, it could be exhibition entertainment. Like amusement park, art shows, trade exhibitions, and fairs.</i>	<i>For example, it could be exhibition entertainment like amusement park, art shows, trade exhibitions, and fairs.</i>
3.2	<i>Because the meaning and wishes of success is different to each other, we can divide successful person in five types: based on Spirituality, Physical, Social, Family, and Financial.</i>	<i>Because the meaning and wishes of success is different to each other, we can divide successful person in five types: based on spirituality, physical, social, family, and financial.</i>
3.3	<i>They can be perfectly happy to get B or C even though with some effort.</i>	<i>They can be perfectly happy to get B or C even though with some effort.</i>

Example 3.1 shows an unnecessary period addition, Example 3.2 shows unnecessary capitals in common nouns, and Example 3.3 shows a letter addition. Regarding 3.2, for instance, after a colon to begin a list, we do not capitalize the first letter of nouns unless they are proper nouns or refer to a particular place, person, or thing (Straus, 2008, p. 72).

Omission Errors

This error occurs when there is an absence of a necessary punctuation mark like comma, period, and semicolon in a sentence, or an absence of a letter in a word, or an absence of capitalization. Like addition errors, omission errors also take place in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Many students, for instance, omitted a comma or period in the position where it should be there. Below are examples of omission errors committed by the students.

Table 4 Examples of Omission Errors

No.	The Error	Suggested Revision
4.1	<i>Therefore we also need to provide care and protection for our skin such as using sunscreen or sunblock...</i>	<i>Therefore, we also need to provide care and protection for our skin such as using sunscreen or sunblock...</i>

4.2	<i>Besides that, there are also educational TV shows about learning religion such as Islam itu indah, Berita Islami masa kini, and others</i>	<i>Besides that, there are also educational TV shows about learning religion such as Islam Itu Indah, Berita Islami Masa Kini, and others.</i>
4.3	<i>Dept news usually has in-depth reviews of an event.</i>	<i>Depth news usually has in-depth reviews of an event.</i>

Example 4.1 shows that the students omitted a comma after a transitional word. Example 4.2 shows omissions of capitalization, and Example 4.3 shows an omission of a letter.

Misformation Errors

Misformation error is indicated by the wrong use of a certain item (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982). In the students' essays, misordering errors occur in punctuation and spelling. In the comma case, for example, the error is signaled by the use of another punctuation mark instead of comma. Some students in this study used a period to replace another punctuation mark such as a comma. Below is an example of misformation error in period.

Table 5 Example of Misformation Error in Period

No.	The Error	Suggested Revision
5.1	<i>To help people acquire the character of a successful person. There are six characters possessed by a successful person: optimistic, creative, ambitious, prepared, responsible, and committed.</i>	<i>To help people acquire the character of a successful person, there are six characters possessed by a successful person: optimistic, creative, ambitious, prepared, responsible, and committed.</i>

Table 5 shows that the students misused the period. It is considered an error since the first part of the sentences is a phrase that modifies the whole sentence. It is not an independent clause, but it ended with a period as if it was an independent clause. Instead of a period, there should be a comma to separate the phrase from the clause to form a sentence.

Misordering Errors

Based on the data, the students committed misordering errors in punctuation and spelling. A misordering error in punctuation takes place when a punctuation mark is placed in a wrong position, and a misordering error in spelling occurs when the letters within a word are misarranged or put in the wrong order. Examples of such errors can be seen in the following table.

Table 6 Examples of Misordering Errors

No.	The Error	Suggested Revision
6.1	<i>I wish my personality can be like that except, moody.</i>	<i>I wish my personality can be like that, except moody.</i>
6.2	<i>This show is giving us actual information about crime, politic, economic, climate, wheater in Indonesia or abroad.</i>	<i>This show is giving us actual information about crime, politic, economic, climate, weather in Indonesia or abroad.</i>

Example 6.1 shows a wrong position of a comma, and Example 6.2 shows that the letter *h* in *wheater* is mis-ordered: it should occur in the second syllable in *weather*. While the first example may not alter the meaning of the sentence, the misarranged letter in the second example has caused the word to have no meaning.

The findings described above show that the student participants of this study committed errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling in their essays. This is similar to the finding of other studies (Wu & Garza, 2014; Manzolim & Gumpal, 2015; Shweba & Mujiyanto, 2017). Shweba and Mujiyanto (2017), for instance, found that first-year university students committed errors of writing mechanics, including punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. This present study also found that punctuation errors occur to period, comma, colon, semicolon, apostrophe, quotation marks, and hyphen, seven of 12 punctuation marks suggested by Straus (2008).

Based on Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), the four types of error (addition, omission, misformation, and misordering) are found in punctuation and spelling. Meanwhile, only addition and omission errors are found in capitalization, which is obvious as a letter is written either in lowercase or in uppercase. The errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling occurred mostly because the students failed to apply correct rules of punctuation and capitalization, and because they misspelled some words.

Moreover, it can also be seen in Table 2 that the most frequent type of errors in writing mechanics is the addition of capitalization (211), followed by omissions in punctuation (179) and misformation errors in punctuation (132). This finding is interesting since if the error were seen based on the aspects of writing mechanics, capitalization does not undergo the most frequent error, but it is punctuation that has the most frequent errors. This finding suggests that, besides punctuation, capitalization is still problematic to most students of this study. Many errors in capitalization

occurred since the students tended to capitalize the first letter of a noun which does not belong to proper nouns, which are specific nouns referring to the individual names of particular places, persons, or things (Oshima and Hogue 2007). The students treated some nouns as if they were specific or had a special role, which indicates that the students have less understanding of what proper nouns are.

Following the addition of capitalization, the second most frequent type of errors is the omission of comma. In the essays, this error seems to have been triggered by the students' tendency to write run-on sentences. According to Straus (2008, 56), a run-on sentence takes place when two clauses are connected without any punctuation mark. Most of the run-on sentences created by the participants are due to the absence of a comma after a transitional word, after a dependent clause, and before a coordinating conjunction that connects two independent clauses. This error has the most occurrences in punctuation marks.

Finally, the fact that most errors occur to punctuation seems to be logical. There are two possible reasons: there are many punctuation marks, 12 according to Strauss (2008), and each has its own rules of usage. This finding is in line with that of Nurwahyuni (Nurwahyuni, 2017), and Manzolim and Gumpal (2015) that conclude that punctuation is the most difficult compared to other writing mechanics. The students might have difficulty in remembering and applying the many rules properly in their essays. This finding suggests that punctuation, especially comma, is a problem for the student participants of this study.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on errors in writing mechanics in division and classification essays produced by university students at semester two, this study found that the errors occur in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Of the three aspects, punctuation marks, particularly comma, undergo most errors that belong to four types: addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. Errors in capitalization are at the second place, followed by errors in spelling that has the fewest occurrences. In terms of the types, addition has the most errors, which is followed by omission, misformation, and misordering. Another finding is that addition errors in capitalization become the most

frequent error type in the writing mechanics, followed by omission errors in punctuation, and misformation errors in punctuation.

Like the findings of other studies, this present study confirms that writing mechanics, especially punctuation marks, appear to be a problem for many ESL/EFL learners regardless of their age and level of English. Therefore, English teachers in both secondary schools and universities need to deal with the issue. This can be done by making their students aware of the importance of writing mechanics, frequently exposing the students to occurrences of writing mechanics in different contexts, and encouraging them to practice writing mechanics in varied types of writing.

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