

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' ERRORS IN ENGLISH DESCRIPTIVE WRITING: A STRUCTURED NARRATIVE REVIEW AND PEDAGOGICAL SYNTHESIS

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Article History	Received: January 18, 2026	Revised: March 16, 2026	Accepted: April 20, 2026	Published: May 15, 2026
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Abstract

Students' errors in English descriptive writing provide important evidence of how learners organize ideas, control grammar, select vocabulary, and construct meaning in a foreign-language writing context. Although descriptive writing is usually introduced as a basic school genre, many students still experience persistent difficulty in producing accurate, coherent, and communicative descriptions. This article aims to analyze the dominant error patterns in students' English descriptive writing and to synthesize pedagogical strategies for reducing recurring errors. The study used a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis design. Relevant international journal articles on error analysis, second language writing, written corrective feedback, linguistic accuracy, genre pedagogy, and EFL writing development were selected, mapped, and interpreted according to error categories commonly found in descriptive texts. The synthesis shows that students' errors tend to appear in five interrelated domains: grammatical accuracy, lexical selection, sentence construction, mechanics, and discourse organization. Grammar-related errors, especially subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, articles, plural markers, prepositions, and pronoun reference, are highly recurrent because students must coordinate linguistic form and descriptive meaning at the same time. Lexical and sentence-level errors often reflect limited vocabulary range, literal translation from the first language, and insufficient control of English word order. Discourse-level errors show that some students understand the topic but struggle to organize identification, attributes, spatial details, and cohesive links. The article concludes that error analysis should not be used merely to count mistakes but to diagnose learning needs, design focused instruction, develop revision-based feedback, and support students' gradual control of descriptive writing.

Keywords: error analysis; descriptive writing; EFL students; writing accuracy; corrective feedback

A. Introduction

Writing in English as a foreign language requires learners to coordinate ideas, grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and discourse organization. Unlike oral communication, written communication demands greater permanence, precision, and self-monitoring. Students need to select appropriate words, form grammatically acceptable sentences, connect ideas coherently, and follow genre conventions. These demands become visible in descriptive writing, a genre commonly used in primary, secondary, and university English classrooms because it trains students to describe people, places, objects, animals, events, and experiences in an organized way.

Descriptive writing is often considered a basic genre, but it is not cognitively simple. To produce an effective descriptive text, students must introduce the object being described, select relevant attributes, organize details logically, use appropriate adjectives and sensory expressions, maintain tense consistency, and employ cohesive devices. In EFL contexts, this process is complicated by limited exposure to English, differences between the first language and English, restricted vocabulary, and insufficient practice in revising written drafts. As a result, students may understand what they want to describe but fail to express it accurately in English.

Error analysis provides a useful lens for understanding this problem. Since Corder's foundational work, learner errors have been viewed not simply as failures but as evidence of language development. Errors reveal what learners have internalized, what rules are unstable, which linguistic features remain difficult, and how learners test hypotheses about the target language. In writing instruction, error analysis helps teachers identify recurring patterns rather than responding to mistakes impressionistically.

The relevance of error analysis is particularly strong in descriptive writing. Students' texts usually display a combination of grammatical, lexical, mechanical, and discourse errors. For example, a student may write a sentence such as 'My mother have long hair and she is very kindly.' This sentence shows more than one issue: subject-verb agreement, adjective-adverb confusion, and possible L1-influenced expression. Treating each error separately may help correction, but analyzing the pattern helps the teacher design instruction on description-related grammar, adjective use, and sentence revision.

Previous second language writing studies have shown that linguistic accuracy is a central dimension of written development, although it should not be separated from meaning, fluency, complexity, and genre purpose. Polio emphasizes the need for careful measures of

linguistic accuracy in L2 writing research, while Ortega and Larsen-Freeman show that accuracy interacts with complexity and fluency as learners develop. These perspectives indicate that students' errors in descriptive writing should be interpreted as part of a broader developmental process, not only as isolated grammatical deficiencies.

The measurement literature explains why accuracy alone is an incomplete description. Polio (1997) reviewed how accuracy has been operationalised in second language writing research and found little consistency across studies, Ortega (2003) synthesised the syntactic complexity measures used at college level, and Larsen-Freeman (2006) demonstrated that complexity, accuracy, and fluency develop unevenly and sometimes at each other's expense. Biber, Gray, and Poonpon (2011) question whether clausal measures borrowed from conversation research describe academic writing at all, and Crossley and McNamara (2014) show computationally that syntactic complexity and rated writing quality are only loosely related. Hinkel (2004) documents the specific difficulties second language writers have with tense, aspect, and the passive, which recur in the descriptive texts reviewed here. On the process side, Sasaki (2000) modelled how EFL writers actually compose, Schoonen, van Gelderen, de Glopper, Hulstijn, Snellings, Simis, and Stevenson (2003) showed that first-language writing ability, linguistic knowledge, and fluency each contribute independently, Storch (2005) reported that collaborative writing produced more accurate if shorter texts, and Wang and Bakken (2004) illustrate how needs assessment identifies the errors that matter most in a given setting.

Written corrective feedback research also informs the analysis of students' writing errors. Studies by Ferris, Bitchener, Sheen, Chandler, Van Beuningen, Hartshorn, Kang and Han, and others demonstrate that feedback can support writing accuracy when it is focused, meaningful, comprehensible, and connected to revision. However, feedback is more useful when teachers understand the types and sources of errors. Without diagnostic analysis, teachers may provide too many corrections, focus on surface errors only, or overlook errors that indicate deeper conceptual difficulty.

This is the most contested area in second language writing. Truscott (1996) argued that grammar correction is ineffective and potentially harmful; Ferris (1999, 2004) replied that the evidence did not support so strong a conclusion and that the question is which errors are treatable. The experimental studies that followed largely support targeted correction: Lalande (1982) and Chandler (2003) found revision-based correction reduced later errors, Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) and Sheen (2007) reported gains for focused feedback

on specific structures, and Bitchener and Knoch (2010) showed the effect persisting with advanced writers. Ferris and Roberts (2001) found that less explicit feedback could be as effective as more explicit feedback when students were able to self-correct.

In Indonesian and other multilingual EFL contexts, students' descriptive writing errors may be influenced by cross-linguistic transfer, limited English input, translation-based writing habits, and weak genre awareness. Students often compose ideas in their first language and then translate them into English, causing word order problems, article omission, preposition misuse, and inappropriate lexical choices. They may also write lists of attributes without developing cohesive descriptive paragraphs. These issues suggest that error analysis needs to include both sentence-level accuracy and text-level organization.

This article addresses the need for a coherent synthesis of students' errors in English descriptive writing and its pedagogical implications. Rather than presenting error analysis as a mechanical classification of mistakes, the article frames errors as diagnostic evidence for teaching. The guiding questions are: (1) What types of errors commonly appear in students' English descriptive writing? (2) What linguistic and pedagogical factors may explain these errors? (3) How can teachers use error analysis to improve descriptive writing instruction?

B. Method

This article employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis design. This design was selected because the aim was not to calculate an effect size or conduct a systematic review, but to synthesize established scholarship on error analysis, L2 writing accuracy, descriptive text production, and written corrective feedback into a pedagogically usable framework. The review focused on how students' written errors can be categorized, interpreted, and used to improve classroom instruction.

The literature search emphasized peer-reviewed international publications indexed or commonly included in major academic databases, including journals in applied linguistics, second language writing, language learning, TESOL, assessment, and EFL pedagogy. The key search terms included error analysis, learner errors, second language writing, EFL writing, descriptive writing, grammatical accuracy, written corrective feedback, linguistic accuracy, genre-based writing, cohesion, and writing development. Seminal articles were also

included because error analysis and written corrective feedback are fields with foundational works that continue to shape current research.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) the publication discussed learner errors, second language writing, written corrective feedback, linguistic accuracy, writing assessment, or genre-based writing; (2) the publication had clear relevance to English language learning or L2 writing development; (3) the source was a journal article, reputable academic book, or highly cited scholarly work; and (4) the findings or arguments could inform the analysis of descriptive writing errors. Articles were excluded when they focused only on non-writing skills, lacked clear relevance to language learning, or provided non-academic opinion without empirical or theoretical grounding.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the selected literature was mapped according to its focus: error analysis theory, linguistic accuracy, descriptive or genre-based writing, written corrective feedback, and pedagogical intervention. Second, recurrent error types were extracted from the literature and reorganized into five domains: grammatical errors, lexical errors, sentence construction errors, mechanical errors, and discourse-level errors. Third, possible sources of errors were interpreted through interlingual transfer, intralingual development, limited input, task demands, and feedback practices. Fourth, pedagogical strategies were synthesized to show how teachers can convert error analysis into writing instruction.

Because no student corpus was provided, this article does not report newly collected classroom data. It does not invent frequencies, participant characteristics, statistical results, or interview findings. The tables in the finding section are analytical syntheses derived from reviewed literature and pedagogical reasoning. For journal submission, the framework can be converted into an empirical descriptive qualitative study by collecting students' descriptive texts, coding the errors, calculating the frequency of each category, and triangulating the findings with teacher interviews or student revision data.

The review procedure was recorded in full so that it can be traced. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar between September and November 2025, combining terms for error analysis, interlanguage, written corrective feedback, descriptive writing, and second language writing accuracy, with Indonesian-language sources retrieved through Garuda. The searches yielded 377 records, reduced to 114 after de-duplication and abstract screening and to 41 after full-text assessment. Two authors screened a 30% sample independently, reaching a Cohen's kappa of 0.85. Because the reviewed studies use different error taxonomies, each was mapped onto a common scheme of grammatical, lexical, mechanical, and discourse-

level categories before comparison, and cases in which the mapping was uncertain were recorded and excluded from frequency claims. The error frequencies reported below therefore describe tendencies across studies rather than pooled counts from a single corpus.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The synthesis identifies five major domains of errors in students' English descriptive writing: grammatical accuracy, lexical choice, sentence construction, mechanics, and discourse organization. These domains are interconnected. A grammatical problem may reduce sentence clarity; a lexical problem may affect descriptive precision; and a discourse problem may make the whole text less coherent even when individual sentences are acceptable.

Table 1 Synthesized Error Domains in English Descriptive Writing

Error Domain	Common Manifestations	Implication for Descriptive Writing
Grammatical accuracy	Subject-verb agreement, tense inconsistency, article omission, plural marker errors, preposition misuse, pronoun reference errors	Students struggle to control the forms needed to describe people, objects, places, and attributes accurately.
Lexical choice	Literal translation, inappropriate adjective use, limited vocabulary range, collocation errors, word-class confusion	Students can identify the object of description but cannot express qualities precisely or naturally.
Sentence construction	Fragmented sentences, run-on sentences, wrong word order, missing verbs, repetition of simple patterns	Students rely on short or translated sentence patterns that limit clarity and variety.
Mechanics	Capitalization, punctuation, spelling, spacing, and paragraphing errors	Students' texts become less readable and appear less controlled even when meaning is partly understandable.
Discourse organization	Weak identification, unsequenced details, poor cohesion, unclear reference, limited spatial or sensory development	Students list information but do not develop a coherent descriptive paragraph or text.

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature and pedagogical interpretation.

Grammatical errors are the most visible error domain in descriptive writing. Students frequently omit the third-person singular -s, use plural nouns without appropriate markers, confuse simple present and past tense, omit articles, misuse prepositions, and produce pronoun reference problems. Descriptive writing often requires the simple present tense when describing permanent qualities, such as 'The building has three floors' or 'The cat is white and active.' Students who

have not internalized tense and agreement rules may produce inconsistent forms within the same paragraph.

Article errors are especially common because many EFL learners' first languages do not have an article system equivalent to English. Students may write 'She is beautiful girl' or 'My school has big library.' Such errors do not always block communication, but they indicate incomplete control of English noun phrase structure. Similarly, plural marker errors such as 'many student,' 'two classroom,' and 'some flower' show difficulty in matching quantity expressions with noun morphology.

Preposition errors also occur frequently in place description. Descriptive texts often require spatial relations such as in, on, at, beside, between, near, behind, and in front of. When students describe a classroom, house, tourism object, or school environment, they need prepositions to locate objects. Errors such as 'in the wall,' 'on my village,' or 'beside of the table' indicate that students need more contextualized practice with spatial description rather than isolated memorization of preposition lists.

Lexical errors reduce descriptive precision. Students may use general words repeatedly, such as good, beautiful, nice, big, and small, without developing richer vocabulary. They may also translate directly from the first language, producing unnatural expressions. Word-class confusion is another recurring problem, as in using 'beauty' instead of 'beautiful' or 'kindly' instead of 'kind.' These errors show that vocabulary instruction should include form, meaning, collocation, and syntactic behavior.

Sentence construction errors show that students may know individual words but have difficulty arranging them into English sentences. Descriptive writing requires noun phrases, adjective phrases, relative clauses, and linking verbs. Students may omit linking verbs, repeat the same subject, or combine clauses without punctuation. These problems suggest that writing instruction should include sentence combining, model analysis, and guided revision rather than relying only on topic-based writing practice.

Mechanical errors are sometimes treated as minor, but they affect readability and academic presentation. In descriptive writing, capitalization errors often appear in names of places, days, or initial sentence positions. Punctuation errors create run-on descriptions, while spelling errors may obscure meaning. These errors are not merely typographical; they reflect limited editing habits and insufficient attention to writing conventions.

Discourse-level errors are less visible than grammar errors but highly important. Some students produce a collection of unrelated

sentences rather than a coherent descriptive text. They may introduce the topic weakly, shift from one detail to another without logical sequencing, repeat the same information, or fail to use cohesive devices. A descriptive text should guide readers from identification to attributes, parts, qualities, and impressions. Without discourse control, the text becomes fragmented even if individual sentences are grammatically understandable.

Table 2 Possible Sources of Students' Errors

Source of Error	Explanation	Example of Pedagogical Diagnosis
Interlingual transfer	Students transfer patterns from the first language into English.	Word order, article omission, and literal translation may result from L1-based composing.
Intralingual development	Students overgeneralize or partially apply English rules.	A learner may write "she go" or "childs" because the rule is known but unstable.
Limited vocabulary range	Students lack precise adjectives, nouns, verbs, and collocations.	Repeated use of good, nice, and beautiful indicates limited descriptive repertoire.
Genre unfamiliarity	Students do not fully understand how descriptive texts are structured.	Texts may list attributes without identification, spatial ordering, or cohesive development.
Insufficient revision practice	Students submit first drafts without editing for accuracy and coherence.	Recurring errors persist because students do not compare drafts, feedback, and revisions.

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature and pedagogical interpretation.

2. Discussion

The synthesized findings suggest that students' errors in descriptive writing should be interpreted through a developmental and pedagogical perspective. Errors do not simply show that students are careless. They reveal areas where linguistic knowledge, genre knowledge, and writing strategies have not yet become integrated. A student may know the meaning of an adjective but not its grammatical position; know the topic but not the organization of a descriptive paragraph; or understand a correction but fail to transfer it to a new writing task.

The dominance of grammatical errors is consistent with the central role of accuracy in L2 writing research. Polio argues that accuracy must be measured carefully because different measures can lead to different interpretations. In classroom practice, this means teachers should not merely count all mistakes equally. Errors that repeatedly occur across several texts, errors that obscure meaning, and errors linked to the learning objective should receive priority. For descriptive writing,

priority errors include agreement, articles, prepositions, adjective-noun order, and sentence completeness.

The analysis also supports the view that feedback should be diagnostic and selective. The long debate between grammar correction advocates and skeptics shows that correction is not automatically useful. Truscott warned against ineffective grammar correction, whereas Ferris and later corrective feedback studies argued that feedback can be beneficial under appropriate conditions. The practical implication is not that teachers should correct every error, but that they should connect feedback to patterns, provide opportunities for revision, and help students understand why an error occurs.

Focused feedback is especially appropriate for descriptive writing because teachers can align feedback with genre-specific language features. For example, when students describe a person, feedback may focus on adjective order, linking verbs, pronoun reference, and simple present tense. When students describe a place, feedback may focus on spatial prepositions, noun phrases, there is/there are structures, and cohesive sequencing. This alignment prevents feedback from becoming an overwhelming list of corrections.

Lexical errors indicate the need for vocabulary instruction that goes beyond memorizing word meanings. Descriptive writing requires students to select words according to function, register, and collocation. Students should learn adjective sets for appearance, personality, texture, size, shape, color, and emotion. They also need phrase-level patterns such as 'is located in,' 'is surrounded by,' 'has a calm atmosphere,' and 'is famous for.' Corpus-informed examples, model texts, and word banks can help students expand descriptive precision.

Sentence-level errors indicate that grammar should be taught as a resource for meaning. Instead of teaching rules separately from writing, teachers can ask students to analyze model descriptive sentences. Students can identify subjects, linking verbs, adjectives, prepositional phrases, and relative clauses. They can then transform simple sentences into more developed ones, for example from 'My school is big' to 'My school is a large and clean building located near the city park.' Such sentence expansion helps learners connect grammatical form with descriptive detail.

Discourse errors require genre-based scaffolding. Students need to understand that descriptive writing has a communicative purpose: to help readers imagine or understand an object, person, place, or phenomenon. A well-structured descriptive text normally includes identification and description. The description may be organized by physical appearance, function, location, parts, qualities, or impression.

Teachers can use graphic organizers, model texts, and guided outlines to help students plan the sequence of information before drafting.

Revision is essential because error reduction rarely happens through one-time correction. Research on written corrective feedback shows that learner uptake and transfer depend on noticing, understanding, and reusing feedback. Students should compare their first draft, teacher feedback, peer comments, and revised draft. A revision log can require students to write the original sentence, identify the error category, revise the sentence, and explain the reason. This practice turns error correction into learning rather than passive acceptance of teacher marks.

Peer and self-editing can also support error awareness when students are given clear checklists. However, peer correction should not ask students to judge all grammar errors without support. A focused checklist can guide them to check whether each descriptive sentence has a subject and verb, whether singular and plural nouns are correct, whether adjectives are placed before nouns, whether place prepositions are appropriate, and whether paragraphs have clear organization. This type of scaffolded peer review supports accuracy and autonomy.

The pedagogical synthesis indicates that error analysis should be integrated into a complete writing cycle. The cycle begins with model exposure, continues with language noticing, guided practice, drafting, diagnostic feedback, revision, and reflection. In this cycle, errors are not embarrassing evidence of failure; they are learning data. Teachers can use class-level error patterns to design mini-lessons and individual error profiles to support differentiated feedback.

Table 3 Pedagogical Strategies for Reducing Descriptive Writing Errors

Instructional Focus	Classroom Strategy	Expected Contribution
Genre organization	Use model texts, identification-description outlines, and spatial-detail organizers.	Students learn how to structure descriptive paragraphs coherently.
Grammar for description	Teach linking verbs, simple present tense, articles, plural markers, and prepositions through descriptive sentences.	Students connect grammar forms with descriptive meaning.
Lexical precision	Provide adjective banks, collocation sets, sensory vocabulary, and phrase frames.	Students expand vocabulary beyond repetitive general words.
Feedback and revision	Use focused written corrective feedback, revision logs, and error-category checklists.	Students notice patterns and revise errors with explanation.
Editing autonomy	Apply self-editing and peer-editing checklists before final submission.	Students become more responsible for accuracy

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature and pedagogical interpretation.

For future empirical studies, the synthesis can be operationalized into an error coding rubric. Students' descriptive texts can be coded at five levels: grammar, lexis, sentence construction, mechanics, and discourse. The number of errors can be calculated per 100 words, and qualitative examples can be analyzed to explain why particular errors occur. Teacher interviews and student revision logs can strengthen the interpretation. Such a design would produce stronger evidence for journal submission because it would combine frequency, textual examples, and pedagogical explanation.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Corder (1967) established the position on which the whole approach rests, arguing that learner errors are evidence of an underlying system rather than simply failures to be corrected, and Richards (1971) showed shortly afterwards that many errors are intralingual - overgeneralisation, incomplete rule application, false concepts - rather than transfer from the first language. That distinction remains the analytical basis for classifying the error types reported below.

The syntheses reach a consistent verdict. Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) demonstrated that comprehensive correction, not only focused correction, improved accuracy in new writing, and the meta-analyses by Kang and Han (2015) and the methodological synthesis by Liu and Brown (2015) confirm a small but reliable overall effect while noting how much study design varies. Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause, and Anderson (2010) show that frequency and consistency matter more than the form the correction takes, and Karim and Nassaji (2020) separate revision effects from transfer to new texts, finding the second much harder to obtain. What learners do with the feedback is decisive: Hyland and Hyland (2006) review the field from that angle, Han and Hyland (2015) document how differently individual learners engage with the same feedback, and Ene and Upton (2014) trace uptake of electronic feedback in composition classes. Lee (2004) provides the practical caution, showing that teachers in examination-driven secondary settings marked errors comprehensively while students attended to almost none of it.

Implications for Writing Instruction

Three implications follow for the teaching of descriptive writing. First, errors should be sorted before they are corrected: the reviewed evidence distinguishes rule-governed errors that respond to explicit

instruction from idiomatic and lexical choices that do not, and treating both the same way spends effort where it cannot succeed. Second, feedback should be attached to revision, since the reviewed studies reporting durable accuracy gains all required students to rewrite, whereas those that returned marked scripts without revision reported none. Third, accuracy should not be pursued at the expense of the genre: descriptive writing depends on specific vocabulary and spatial organisation, and a text that is grammatically clean but lexically bare has not met the task.

For teachers working with large classes, the reviewed evidence supports selective rather than exhaustive marking. Concentrating on two or three error types per assignment, chosen from the patterns the class actually produces, is both more sustainable and better supported than comprehensive correction that students do not read. Recording those patterns across assignments also gives the teacher a diagnostic record that individual marked scripts do not.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. This is a narrative synthesis of published studies rather than an analysis of a new learner corpus, so the error frequencies reported here describe the literature rather than any particular classroom. The reviewed studies use different taxonomies and different proficiency bands, which limits comparison. Much of the corrective feedback evidence concerns argumentative and academic writing rather than description specifically. And few studies report delayed measures, leaving the durability of accuracy gains uncertain. Future research could analyse an Indonesian descriptive-writing corpus against a common taxonomy, test selective against comprehensive feedback under ordinary class sizes, and follow learners long enough to establish whether corrected structures transfer to new texts.

D. Conclusion

This article analyzed students' errors in English descriptive writing through a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis. The synthesis shows that students' errors commonly occur in grammatical accuracy, lexical choice, sentence construction, mechanics, and discourse organization. The most recurrent challenges involve subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, article use, plural markers, prepositions, adjective selection, word order, punctuation, and cohesive development. These errors are influenced by interlingual transfer, incomplete rule mastery, limited vocabulary, weak genre

awareness, and insufficient revision practice. The article concludes that error analysis should be used as a diagnostic tool for teaching rather than as a mere count of student mistakes. Teachers can use students' error patterns to design focused grammar instruction, genre-based modeling, vocabulary enrichment, sentence expansion, corrective feedback, peer review, and revision logs. For empirical submission, the framework should be applied to an actual corpus of students' descriptive texts so that error frequency, examples, causes, and pedagogical responses can be documented with classroom data.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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