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SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE TRANSLATION ERRORS IN INDONESIAN INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT:

This current study aimed to identify simple present tense translation errors made by Indonesian intermediate EFL learners. A qualitative descriptive case study design was adopted, employing documentation and transcription as the primary research instruments. Thirty-six undergraduate students majoring in English Education participated in this study. The data were obtained through the translation of fifteen Indonesian sentences written in the simple present tense. The results indicated a total of 278 grammatical errors, consisting of 118 misformation errors, 74 omission errors, 51 misordering errors, and 35 addition errors. Misformation appeared as the most frequent type, followed by omission, misordering, and addition. After identifying the errors, this research further analyzed the possible sources, which were found to be influenced by interlingual factors such as syntactic transfer from Bahasa Indonesia and intralingual factors including overgeneralization, incomplete rule acquisition, and performance pressure resulting from academic anxiety. The findings highlight the gap between learners' declarative knowledge of grammar and their ability to apply tense rules accurately during real-time translation tasks.

Keywords: *Translation Errors, Surface Strategy Taxonomy, Simple Present Tense, EFL Learners, Grammar Acquisition*

INTRODUCTION

Academic anxiety related to English grammar mastery remains a persistent issue among Indonesian EFL learners, particularly when they are required to apply grammatical rules spontaneously during translation tasks. Grammar especially the simple present tense is often perceived as a high-pressure linguistic component because learners must monitor accuracy, retrieve lexical items, and apply morphosyntactic rules simultaneously. Previous research has shown that the cognitive load triggered by academic anxiety increases the likelihood of grammatical errors, especially in real-time tasks that require immediate linguistic processing rather than planned production.¹ In the Indonesian context, where tense distinctions do not exist morphologically in the first language, learners often experience heightened anxiety and confusion when translating sentences that require tense marking, copular verbs, and subject–verb agreement—features that

¹ Elaine K. Horwitz, Michael B. Horwitz, and Joann Cope, "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety," *The Modern Language Journal* 70, no. 2 (1986): 125–132.

operate differently from Bahasa Indonesia.² This creates additional challenges in constructing accurate English sentences, particularly in the simple present tense.

The simple present tense is introduced early in English instruction and is considered a foundational grammatical structure.³ However, Indonesian learners continue to struggle with the correct application of verb inflections, copulas, and syntactic arrangement. Multiple studies have demonstrated that errors related to subject–verb agreement, omission of the linking verb “be,” and misformation of verb structures frequently appear in learners’ writing and translation tasks, indicating incomplete mastery of even basic grammatical forms.⁴⁵ Translation tasks, especially spontaneous ones, provide a unique window into students’ procedural knowledge, which often diverges significantly from their declarative understanding of grammar. Learners may memorize rules yet fail to apply them automatically when producing language in real-time contexts.

Interlanguage theory provides a useful framework for understanding these persistent errors. According to Selinker, interlanguage is a systematic linguistic system constructed by second language learners, shaped by L1 transfer, developmental processes, and learning strategies.⁶ When Indonesian learners translate sentences from their mother tongue into English, they often rely on elements of Bahasa Indonesia—such as flexible word order, absence of tense markers, and lack of subject–verb agreement—resulting in systematic interlingual errors.⁷ At the same time, learners may also commit intralingual errors stemming from overgeneralization, incomplete acquisition of rules, or misapplication of patterns.⁸ These combined influences explain why simple present tense continues to be a source of difficulty even at the intermediate level.

Several previous studies have examined translation errors among Indonesian EFL learners. Shiddiq et al. found that Indonesian students committed both lexical and grammatical errors when translating Indonesian sentences into English, with grammatical errors occurring more frequently than lexical ones.⁹ Fitriani reported that most grammar errors produced by EFL learners were

² Suharto, M., and Indah Lestari, “The Role of L1 Interference in Indonesian EFL Students’ Grammar Proficiency,” *TEFLIN Journal* 33, no. 2 (2022): 178–195.

³ Scott Thornbury, *How to Teach Grammar* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1999).

⁴ Siti S. Fitriani, “Common Grammar Errors in EFL Writing: A Case of Indonesian Students,” *International Journal of Language and Education* 6, no. 4 (2020): 112–121.

⁵ Rina Yulianti, “The Influence of First Language on English Verb Use Among Indonesian Learners,” *Journal of English Education and Teaching* 3, no. 2 (2019): 78–90.

⁶ Larry Selinker, “Interlanguage,” *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 10 (1972): 209–231.

⁷ Mohammad H. Keshavarz, *Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis in Second Language Acquisition* (Tehran: Rahnama Press, 2012).

⁸ Carl James, *Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis* (London: Longman, 1998).

⁹ M. Shiddiq et al., “Lexical and Grammatical Errors in Indonesian–English Translation,” *Journal of English Education Studies* 2, no. 2 (2024).

caused by omissions and incorrect verb forms, reflecting L1 interference and lack of internalized morphosyntactic knowledge.¹⁰ Yulianti identified frequent misformation in verb-inflection patterns, particularly in sentences requiring third-person singular –s.¹¹ Suharto and Lestari highlighted that Indonesian learners' grammatical errors heavily stem from structural transfer from Bahasa Indonesia.¹² Although these studies provide valuable insights, most focus on mixed-tense translation or writing tasks rather than a targeted investigation of simple present tense translation errors.

Despite the growing number of studies addressing grammatical errors, there remains a notable gap concerning how Indonesian EFL learners manage simple present tense structures specifically in spontaneous translation conditions. Existing research rarely integrates the dimension of academic anxiety as a contributing factor to performance errors in tense usage. Moreover, most studies have not examined error distribution using a controlled set of simple present tense sentences designed specifically to reveal morphosyntactic weaknesses in translation. Thus, there is a need for a more focused study that investigates only simple present tense translation errors and identifies the linguistic factors contributing to those errors.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to conduct an in-depth error analysis of Indonesian intermediate EFL learners' translations of fifteen Indonesian sentences written solely in the simple present tense. By using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, this research seeks to provide a detailed categorization of errors and explore their possible interlingual and intralingual sources. Through this multidimensional focus, the study positions itself to provide a more nuanced understanding of how learners construct and negotiate meaning during translation, how their linguistic choices reflect underlying grammatical competence, and how sociocognitive factors intersect with linguistic processing in shaping error production. Ultimately, these aims guide the analysis of learners' interlanguage development in simple present tense translation and offer empirical insights that may inform pedagogical interventions, curriculum design, and translation-based grammar instruction in EFL contexts.

METHODS

A qualitative method in the form of a descriptive case study was employed in this research to address the research questions and examine learners' grammatical errors within an authentic academic context. This design was selected because a case study allows for an in-depth exploration

¹⁰ Fitriani, "Common Grammar Errors in EFL Writing," 115.

¹¹ Yulianti, "The Influence of First Language on English Verb Use," 84.

¹² Suharto and Lestari, "The Role of L1 Interference," 182.

of a bounded phenomenon through systematic data collection in real-life settings.¹³ The case study approach has been widely applied in social science and applied linguistics research due to its capacity to capture contextualized linguistic behavior and provide a comprehensive understanding of learning processes.¹⁴

In this study, fifteen Indonesian sentences written in the simple present tense were used as the primary research instrument. The sentences were deliberately constructed to elicit specific grammatical features, including subject–verb agreement, verb inflection—particularly the third-person singular –s—and copular constructions. During data collection, participants were instructed to translate all sentences into English under controlled classroom conditions. To ensure that the data reflected the learners’ internalized grammatical competence rather than assisted performance, students were not permitted to use dictionaries or online translation tools. All translated outputs were collected as written documents and served as the primary data source for analysis.

Error Analysis (EA) was employed as the main analytical framework, as it provides a systematic procedure for identifying, describing, and classifying learner language errors.¹⁵ Following the established stages of error analysis, the researchers conducted five analytical steps: collecting the errors, identifying the errors, describing the errors, classifying the errors, and evaluating the errors. The analysis focused exclusively on grammatical errors related to the simple present tense, namely omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Discourse-level errors were excluded from the analysis because the data consisted of isolated sentences rather than connected texts, making issues of cohesion and coherence beyond the scope of this study.

To categorize the grammatical errors, this study adopted the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which classifies errors based on how learners alter the surface structure of target-language forms.¹⁶ This taxonomy was selected because it offers a clear and widely accepted framework for analyzing structural deviations in learner language. In addition, the identified errors were examined in terms of their possible sources, specifically interlingual and intralingual influences. Interlingual errors were identified through evidence of first language transfer from Bahasa Indonesia, such as the absence of tense marking and word-for-word translation patterns. Intralingual errors, on the other

¹³ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013).

¹⁴ Tanya Sammut-Bonnici and John McGee, “Case Study Research,” in *Wiley Encyclopedia of Management*, ed. Cary L. Cooper (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2014).

¹⁵ Yasmin Khanom, “Error Analysis in the EFL Classroom,” *International Journal of English and Education* 3, no. 3 (2014): 142–153.

¹⁶ Heidi C. Dulay, Marina K. Burt, and Stephen D. Krashen, *Language Two* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

hand, were associated with overgeneralization, incomplete rule acquisition, and misapplication of grammatical rules.

The primary data source in this study consisted of the students' translation worksheets containing their English renderings of the fifteen Indonesian sentences. Secondary data were obtained from relevant journal articles, theoretical books, and prior empirical studies related to error analysis and second language acquisition. These secondary sources were used to support the interpretation of findings and strengthen the discussion of error sources, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the analysis.

RESULT

Learner errors are widely regarded as indicators of gaps in the development of an interlanguage system, reflecting learners' incomplete mastery of target language rules.¹⁷ In this study, grammatical errors identified in students' translations were classified using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which categorizes errors based on deviations in surface structure, namely omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.¹⁸ The analysis of translations produced by thirty-six Indonesian intermediate EFL learners revealed that all four error types occurred across the fifteen Indonesian sentences requiring simple present tense constructions in English.

A total of 278 grammatical errors were identified from the 540 translation outputs. Misformation emerged as the most dominant error category, particularly in the incorrect use of verb forms and the misuse of auxiliaries or linking verbs. Many learners failed to apply the third-person singular *-s/-es* rule and frequently produced inaccurate simple present tense structures. Omission errors were also common, especially the absence of the copular verb *be* in nominal predicates and the omission of required inflectional endings. Misordering errors occurred mainly in sentences containing adverbials of frequency or noun modifiers, where students tended to replicate the syntactic patterns of Bahasa Indonesia. Although less frequent, addition errors typically involved unnecessary insertion of auxiliaries, determiners, or other grammatical elements not required in English syntax.

The distribution and nature of these errors indicate that Indonesian intermediate EFL learners experience substantial challenges in producing accurate simple present tense constructions during translation tasks. These challenges stem not only from limited mastery of English

¹⁷ Rod Ellis, *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁸ Heidi C. Dulay, Marina K. Burt, and Stephen D. Krashen, *Language Two* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

morphosyntax but also from L1 transfer and cognitive processing constraints that affect learners' ability to apply grammatical rules consistently.

Misformation emerged as the most dominant error type, indicating that many learners struggled to supply the correct morphological or syntactic form required by the simple present tense. A recurrent pattern was the replacement of the correct –s inflected form with the base form of the verb in sentences requiring third-person singular agreement. For example, in the translation of “*Ayahku memasak untuk keluarganya,*” several learners produced the form “My father cook for his family,” which demonstrates failure to apply the required agreement marker in cooks. This type of misformation reveals that although learners may possess declarative knowledge of the third-person rule, they experience difficulty retrieving and applying it during real-time translation, supporting previous observations that productive tasks involving immediate syntactic decisions trigger performance breakdowns.

Omission errors constituted the second highest category. These errors predominantly involved the deletion of essential grammatical elements such as the copula *be* in nominal sentences and the third-person singular -s marker in verbal predicates. One illustrative example is the translation of “*Dia bekerja sebagai kasir di toko itu,*” which appeared in several learners' outputs as “She work as a cashier in that store.” Here, the verb lacks the obligatory morphological inflection. This omission reflects both the absence of such inflections in Bahasa Indonesia and the learners' limited internalization of tense-specific morphological markers in English.

Misordering errors also appeared with notable frequency, particularly in sentences containing adverbials of frequency or noun modifiers. Indonesian word order, which permits relatively flexible placement of temporal adverbs, appears to influence the learners' English constructions. For instance, the sentence “*Mereka setiap hari membaca Al-Qur'an*” was often translated as “They every day read the Qur'an,” mirroring the Indonesian structure rather than the correct English order “They read the Qur'an every day.” This pattern signifies cross-linguistic transfer and indicates that learners sometimes rely on L1 syntactic templates when unsure about English adverb placement.

Addition errors, although the least frequent, offered further insight into learners' tendency to overgeneralize grammatical rules. These errors typically involved inserting unnecessary auxiliaries such as *be* or adding determiners where they were not required. A representative example is the translation of “*Kami belajar bahasa Inggris setiap hari?*” into “We are study English every day.” In such cases, learners demonstrated confusion between simple present and present continuous structures, suggesting that the functional distinction between these two forms is not yet fully consolidated in their interlanguage system.

The quantitative distribution of the errors is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Summary of Error Types Identified in the Learners' Translations

No	Type of Error	Number of Errors	Percentage
1	Misformation	118	42.4%
2	Omission	74	26.6%
3	Misordering	51	18.3%
4	Addition	35	12.6%
Total	—	278	100%

The findings of this study show that the simple present tense remains a challenging grammatical area for Indonesian intermediate learners. Many of the difficulties stem from the need to apply accurate morphological markers and restructure Indonesian sentence patterns into acceptable English forms. The high frequency of misformation and omission errors suggests that essential features such as the third-person singular –s and the use of the copular verb *be* have not been fully internalized. Learners may understand these rules in theory, yet still struggle to activate them consistently when translating under time constraints.

The presence of misordering and addition errors further illustrates the influence of Bahasa Indonesia on learners' English production. Indonesian word order and the absence of certain grammatical markings often lead students to transfer familiar L1 structures into English, especially when they are unsure of the correct form. Such tendencies point to the interplay between limited grammatical mastery and reliance on familiar linguistic patterns.

Taken together, these results highlight a clear discrepancy between learners' declarative knowledge of grammar and their ability to apply it in spontaneous performance. Factors such as syntactic transfer and task-related pressure potentially heightened by academic anxiety appear to shape the way students process and produce simple present tense forms. These findings underscore the importance of instructional approaches that strengthen automaticity in grammar use and provide learners with more structured opportunities to practice real-time language processing in translation and similar tasks.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the simple present tense continues to pose substantial difficulties for Indonesian intermediate EFL learners. The dominance of misformation and omission errors highlights the learners' limited automatic control of morphological and

syntactic features that are obligatory in English but absent in Bahasa Indonesia. The persistent difficulty with third-person singular agreement, for instance, echoes earlier observations that Indonesian learners often fail to supply inflectional markers because Indonesian verbs remain unchanged regardless of the subject.¹⁹ This structural difference appears to encourage learners to rely on L1-based assumptions when producing English sentences.

Similarly, the frequent omission of the copular verb *be* aligns with findings indicating that Indonesian learners regularly transfer the Indonesian verbless predicate structure into English.²⁰ This tendency reflects the structural differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English, where nominal predicates do not require an overt copula in the former. Although learners may possess declarative awareness of copula rules, the translation task requires them to retrieve the correct grammatical form under cognitive pressure, which many were unable to do consistently. This difficulty supports the claim that learners often experience performance breakdowns when attempting to apply grammatical rules spontaneously rather than in controlled grammar-focused exercises.²¹

Misordering errors, particularly those involving adverb placement, further reinforce the influence of L1 syntax. Indonesian permits flexible placement of adverbials, and this flexibility often leads students to replicate L1 patterns when translating into English. This finding is consistent with the argument that learners rely heavily on first-language structures when navigating grammatical uncertainty in the target language.²² Although misordering constituted a smaller proportion of errors than misformation and omission, it provides important insight into learners' tendency to depend on familiar linguistic patterns rather than adhering to English syntactic conventions.

Addition errors, while the fewest in number, highlight another developmental feature of the learners' interlanguage, namely overgeneralization. Learners frequently inserted the auxiliary *be* in contexts that required only the base verb, suggesting confusion between simple present and present continuous forms. This pattern reflects the developmental nature of intralingual errors in second language acquisition.²³

¹⁹ Rina Yulianti, "The Influence of First Language on English Verb Use Among Indonesian Learners," *Journal of English Education and Teaching* 3, no. 2 (2019): 78–90.

²⁰ Yulia Darma, "Interference of Indonesian Grammar in English Writing," *Journal of English Language Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–10;

²¹ Susan M. Gass and Larry Selinker, *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020).

²² Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, *How Languages Are Learned*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²³ H. Douglas Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (New York: Longman, 2000).

Taken together, these error patterns reveal a clear gap between learners' declarative knowledge of grammar rules and their ability to apply them in spontaneous performance. While students may be capable of identifying correct forms in isolated grammar tasks, the translation activity required real-time processing, lexical retrieval, and syntactic restructuring conditions under which performance is more vulnerable to error. This gap is consistent with the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge, which emphasizes that grammatical accuracy depends on repeated practice and automatization rather than mere rule awareness.²⁴

Cognitive factors may also contribute to these difficulties. Academic anxiety, for example, has been shown to interfere with working memory and reduce accuracy during language tasks. This claim is supported by foundational research on foreign language anxiety, as well as subsequent studies demonstrating that anxiety negatively affects learners' ability to apply grammatical rules under pressure.²⁵ In the context of this study, several of the errors particularly misformation and omission may reflect these cognitive constraints, especially given that translation tasks require simultaneous processing of meaning, structure, and form.

The combined influence of interlingual transfer, intralingual development, and cognitive factors suggests that errors are not merely random or superficial but reflect deeper issues within learners' interlanguage systems. This view aligns with the interlanguage theory, which proposes that second language learners construct systematic linguistic rules that differ from both their first language and the target language and are shaped by processes such as transfer, overgeneralization, and learning strategies.²⁶

These findings carry clear pedagogical implications. First, grammar instruction should not focus exclusively on rule explanation but should include activities that strengthen procedural knowledge, such as guided translation, timed writing, and structured production tasks. Second, contrastive analysis between English and Indonesian may help learners recognize structural features that are not transferable. Finally, reducing performance pressure through low-stakes practice and confidence-building activities that may help minimize anxiety-related errors, supporting recommendations by recent SLA studies emphasizing the impact of affective factors on performance.

²⁴ Rod Ellis, *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

²⁵ Elaine K. Horwitz, Michael B. Horwitz, and Joann Cope, "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety," *The Modern Language Journal* 70, no. 2 (1986): 125–132.

²⁶ Larry Selinker, "Interlanguage," *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 10, no. 3 (1972): 209–231.

Moreover, the discussion reinforces that mastering the simple present tense requires not only knowledge of grammatical rules but also the ability to apply those rules fluently and automatically. The learners' difficulties in this study demonstrate the continuing importance of both structural and psychological support in EFL grammar instruction, particularly in contexts where L1 and L2 differ significantly in morphosyntactic features.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that Indonesian intermediate EFL learners continue to experience substantial difficulties in translating simple present tense sentences from Bahasa Indonesia into English. The total of 278 errors identified across omission, addition, misformation, and misordering categories demonstrates that learners have not fully internalized key morphosyntactic features of the simple present tense. Misformation and omission errors were particularly dominant, suggesting insufficient automatization of third-person singular inflection, copular verbs, and basic tense formation. These persistent issues indicate that learners rely heavily on L1 structural patterns, especially when engaged in cognitively demanding tasks such as translation.

The prominence of L1 transfer and the presence of intralingual factors such as overgeneralization and incomplete rule acquisition further confirm that learners' interlanguage systems are still developing and are influenced by both linguistic and cognitive constraints. Academic anxiety may also contribute to performance fluctuations, limiting learners' ability to apply rules accurately in real time. These observations underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that strengthen procedural knowledge through structured translation practice, explicit contrastive analysis between Indonesian and English grammar, and learning environments that reduce pressure during linguistic performance. By addressing both linguistic and affective dimensions of learning, educators can better support students in achieving greater accuracy in fundamental tense structures.

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