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A CASE STUDY ON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN STUDENTS' DESCRIPTIVE WRITING AT AL GHOZALI SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

The motivation behind this research stems from the observed challenges faced by high school students in mastering English grammar, particularly in writing. This study investigates the grammatical errors frequently made by tenth-grade students in their descriptive writing at Al Ghozali Senior High School, Gunung Sindur, Bogor. The primary objective is to analyze these errors to understand their nature and frequency, providing insights for more effective teaching strategies. This descriptive research utilizes a documentary analysis method, focusing on students' written works. The research subjects are tenth-grade students at Al Ghozali Senior High School. Data collection involved gathering students' descriptive essays, which were then analyzed using a checklist of common grammatical errors adapted from La Trobe University. The checklist includes categories such as subject-verb agreement, verb tense, word class, vocabulary, singular/plural, articles, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. Data analysis revealed that the most frequent errors involved subject-verb agreement (94.47%), followed by verb tense (66.66%) and word class (57.14%). Other common errors included vocabulary usage, singular/plural distinctions, and article usage. These findings highlight specific areas where students struggle the most, providing valuable information for educators. The implications of this research suggest that targeted interventions and continuous practice are essential for improving students' grammatical skills in writing. By addressing the identified errors, teachers can enhance their instructional methods, ultimately helping students achieve better proficiency in English writing. This study not only benefits students and teachers at Al Ghozali Senior High School but also offers insights for future research in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: descriptive writing; error analysis; grammatical errors

INTRODUCTION

Among the four language skills—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—writing is the most complex and challenging for learners. It involves various aspects of language such as text models, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and prepositions (Hastomo, 2019). Many students struggle with writing in English due to their lack of grammatical skills and understanding of English language rules (Yulistiani et al., 2020). Grammar consists of structural rules that govern the arrangement of sentences, phrases, and words in the language.

Generally, the grammatical structure, vocabulary, and spelling of English differ from those of the Indonesian language. This often causes confusion and leads to mistakes in both spoken and written English. Additionally, writing requires the ability to transfer complete information from verbal to written form, which necessitates a good understanding of English grammar. Students

often use Indonesian sentence structures when expressing their ideas in English writing.

The lack of students' ability to understand English grammar and interference from their mother tongue results in frequent writing errors. In English, the terms "errors" and "mistakes" have different meanings. An error is a repeated mistake that occurs because someone has not fully understood the language system, while a mistake happens occasionally due to momentary forgetfulness or mispronunciation, which learners can usually correct themselves. Dulay, as cited in Brown, suggests that an error is an apparent deviation from the grammar of a native speaker, indicating limited knowledge of English language rules (Brown, 2004).

Writing skills are essential for learners to develop after acquiring reading skills. English learners should start learning these skills as early as possible, ideally in primary school (Deiniatur & Cahyono, 2024). At this stage, they are taught how to write the alphabet, syllables, words, word groups, and sentences and paragraphs with contextual themes. In high school, they improve their writing by composing various types of essays, such as descriptive, narrative, and news items (Andewi & Hastomo, 2022).

For second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners, the difficulty in writing lies not only in generating and organizing ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable text. As Hastomo (2016) explains, "There is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master. The difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable text. The skills involved in writing are highly complex. L2 writers have to pay attention to higher-level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower-level skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on."

According to Kharmilah and Narius (2019), descriptive essays have several characteristics: (1) they attempt to show details about the object, (2) they influence emotions and shape the reader's imagination, and (3) they are delivered in an alluring style with a choice of words that excite the reader's senses.

When writing a descriptive text, students need to compose paragraphs that express their ideas or opinions to achieve the goal of writing (Istiara & Hastomo, 2023). Sometimes, students struggle to write words conveyed by their teacher due to a lack of English writing skills, leading to errors such as incorrect tense or verb forms, wrong or missing prepositions, incorrect words, and other types of mistakes.

The frequency and types of errors vary and are closely related to students' language backgrounds, learning strategies, experiences, and individual differences among teachers and learners. By recognizing their writing errors, students can identify and correct them during the learning process (Hastomo & Septiyana, 2022). Teachers can also understand students' problems and teach them how to avoid these issues, while schools can adjust language learning materials based on the learners' current problems.

Observations of student learning outcomes and classroom activities indicate that students' low writing ability is influenced by several factors: (1) lack of interest and motivation to learn English writing, (2) poor vocabulary mastery, which hinders their ability to express and develop ideas in writing, and (3) difficulty using grammatical structures in writing, such as errors with articles, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and punctuation marks (Hastomo & Zulianti, 2021).

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive research design, utilizing documentary analysis to investigate the grammatical errors in descriptive writing by tenth-grade students at Al Ghozali Senior High School (Creswell, 2012). The research aims to gather naturalistic data without any experimental manipulation, providing a comprehensive understanding of the types and frequencies of grammatical errors made by students in their written compositions.

The population of this research consists of tenth-grade students at Al Ghozali Senior High School in Gunung Sindur, Bogor. A total of 21 students participated in the study, providing a

diverse sample of descriptive essays for analysis. These students were selected to represent the general proficiency level and common challenges faced by learners at this educational stage.

The primary instrument used in this research is a checklist adapted from La Trobe University, which categorizes common grammatical errors made by ESL writers. The checklist includes errors related to subject-verb agreement, verb tense, word class, vocabulary, singular/plural forms, articles, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. This instrument facilitates a structured and systematic analysis of the students' writing samples.

Data collection involved gathering descriptive essays written by the students during their regular English classes. These essays served as the primary data source for identifying and categorizing grammatical errors. Additionally, interviews with one of the English teachers at the school were conducted to gain insights into the instructional strategies used to improve students' descriptive writing skills. Data analysis was performed by examining each student's essay using the predefined checklist. Errors were identified, categorized, and quantified to determine their frequency and commonality (Patton, 2002). The analysis focused on understanding the specific areas where students struggle the most and identifying patterns in their grammatical mistakes. The findings were then summarized to provide a clear picture of the grammatical challenges faced by the students, informing potential instructional improvements.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data was gathered from one type of text, which was descriptive writing. There are three kinds of descriptive writing: describing people, describing places, and describing things. The descriptive topic discussed in this research was about describing people. This section was divided into data presentation and data analysis of the grammatical errors commonly made by seventh-grade students. The samples for this research consisted of 21 copies of students' descriptive writing. To identify the presence and absence of specific grammatical errors and written work in the students' descriptive writing, the researcher used an instrument. The results of the grammatical errors commonly made by the seventh-grade students were presented in the following tables. The numbers mentioned in the tables referred to the number of students in each class.

Table 1. Number of Errors Made by Students

| Frequent Errors | Descriptor | Number of Errors |
|--------------------|---|------------------|
| Articles | A mistake with the article –a, an, the, etc. | 10 |
| Verb tense | A mistake with the verb tense. | 14 |
| Subject verb | The subject and verb do not agree in number. e.g. | |
| agreement | She <u>run</u> /We <u>was</u> smiling. | 19 |
| Singular/plural | A mistake with number (singular/plural). | |
| Singular/plurar | e.g. They have three doll in the cupboard. | 11 |
| Punctuation | Capital letters, full stops, or commas missing. | |
| Punctuation | | 2 |
| Word class | The word is in the wrong class. | |
| word class | e.g. She is <u>unemployment.</u> | 12 |
| Vasahulami | The wrong word is used. | |
| Vocabulary | e.g. Let's discuss about Mathematics. | 12 |
| | The sentence is not complete or perhaps is too long | |
| Sentence structure | and need to be reorganized. | 9 |
| Spelling | | 7 |

The results of this research show that the frequency and percentage of errors among students can be categorized into nine types of common errors. The ranking of these errors, from the most frequent to the least frequent, is presented below.

Table 2. Percentage of Students' Errors

| N0 | Item | Frequent Errors | Percentage |
|----|------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| | | | |
| 1 | Subject verb agreement | 19 | 94.47% |
| 2 | Verb tense | 14 | 66.66% |
| 3 | Word class | 12 | 57.14% |
| 4 | Vocabulary | 12 | 57.14% |
| 5 | Singular/plural | 11 | 52.38% |
| 6 | Article | 10 | 47.61% |
| 7 | Sentence structure | 9 | 42.85% |
| 8 | Spelling | 7 | 33.44% |
| 9 | Punctuation | 2 | 9/5% |

Based on the percentage, it can be concluded that the most common grammatical error made by tenth-grade students was subject-verb agreement, with a high percentage of 90.47% among the 21 students. The analysis of the students' descriptive writing identified the following errors, ranked from most to least frequent: subject-verb agreement, verb tense, word class, vocabulary, singular/plural forms, articles, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation.

Data Analysis of Subject-Verb Agreement

In English, there must be agreement between the subject and the verb in a sentence. If the subject is singular, the verb should also be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb should be plural as well. When the subject is a third-person singular noun or pronoun, the verb should also be singular. Students often face difficulties in matching the subject with the correct form of the verb. They sometimes overlook the proper agreement based on the subject. In this research, it was found that 19 out of 21 students, or 90.47%, made errors in subject-verb agreement. Below are examples of the errors made by the students. Many of them did not pay much attention to the usage of the first or third person and their corresponding verb agreement. For example:

Table 3. Analysis of Error on Subject Verb Agreement

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| He teach English | He teaches English |
| I has English teacher | I have an English teacher |

The subject 'He' is a third person singular. Therefore, for simple present tense, the verb agreement has to use verb one plus **s** or **es**. It is also used for subject **He** and **It**. However, for subject **I**, it is a first person singular, and instead of using **has** for the verb agreement, it uses **have**. From these instances, it is clear that students did not pay attention to the verb, which should agree with the singular subject in these sentences. Although students' sentences contain some extent of correct grammar, the students still could not use the subject verb agreement rule correctly, which indicates insufficient language competence. This type of error could be interpreted as 'incomplete application of rules [which] arises when the learners fail to fully develop a certain structure required to produce acceptable sentences'.

Data Analysis of Verb Tense

Verbs can be challenging to understand, and their conjugations are often the hardest part of learning a new language. It is common for learners to accidentally use an incorrect verb form. Overcoming verb tense errors involves more than just understanding the basics of a language. Tense indicates the time of an action or state of being as expressed by a verb. The verb changes

to show the time it refers to. Time signals help determine the correct verb tense to use in a sentence. Students often struggle with constructing sentences in appropriate tenses, such as perfect and simple tenses. They may use the wrong verb form, whether base, infinitive, or past, to express past or present events.

In this research, it was found that 14 students, or 66.66%, made mistakes with verb tense. Examples of these mistakes include:

Table 4. Analysis of Error on Verb Tense

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|---|--|
| He always take a cap every day. | He always wears a cap every day. |
| He is always employ cap every teach. | He is always wears cap while teaching |

In this section, the students chose the wrong verbs or **to be** to make the sentences. This happened because the students have lack of knowledge in choosing the correct verbs for the sentences they made.

Data Analysis of Word Class

In English grammar, a word class is a set of words that share the same formal properties, particularly their inflections and distribution. The term "word class" is similar to the more traditional term "part of speech." It is also referred to as grammatical category, lexical category, or syntactic category, though these terms are not entirely synonymous. The two major families of word classes are lexical (or open/form) classes, which include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, and function (or closed/structure) classes, which include determiners, particles, prepositions, and others.

Understanding word classes helps readers grasp the meaning of writing, such as identifying which words modify others. Students sometimes intend to use an adjective but instead use a noun in the sentence, showing difficulties in distinguishing pairs of English words. In this research, it was found that 57.14% of students made errors by placing words in the wrong class. This indicates that more emphasis is needed on teaching students the distinctions between different word classes to improve their grammatical accuracy in writing.

Table 5. Analysis of Error on Word class

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| He is very smart, explicit, and fierce. | He is very smart, open, and fierce. |
| I love he because | I love him because |

Students sometimes think that they have found the correct words and they can be used at anytime. In this case, the students have to be able to differentiate the function and the meaning of the words first before applying them in sentences.

Data Analysis of Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the collection of words that an individual knows. It plays a crucial role in learning English, as it links the four essential skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Significant improvement in language proficiency can be observed when a learner expands their vocabulary and expressions. One can convey very little with just grammar, but without vocabulary, it is impossible to say anything at all. Vocabulary errors occur when students lack a clear understanding of specific words. While circumlocution—describing a word when its exact term is unknown—is one strategy, more extensive vocabulary study is necessary to prevent such errors. Using resources that present vocabulary in authentic contexts can be particularly helpful in

ensuring proper usage. In this research, it was found that 12 students, or 57.14%, made vocabulary errors. Students often chose incorrect words to explain certain concepts in their writing. The examples of these errors are:

Table 6. Analysis of Error on Vocabulary

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| because we not answer the question | because we not answer the question |
| with true | correctly. |
| He is not height | He is not tall |

Students in translating the words from Indonesian to English were still influenced by Bahasa Indonesia. As a result, they translated the sentences and the meaning of the sentences sounded 'strange' because they were 'too Indonesian'. To avoid this, the students should enrich their vocabulary by reading more English books. They can also find the synonyms of certain words in the dictionary.

Data Analysis of Singular/Plural

In English, nouns are inflected for grammatical number. For countable nouns, this typically means they have different forms for singular and plural. The plural form is usually derived from the singular form, which can either follow regular rules (such as adding -s or -es) or irregular patterns. Students often face difficulties with this aspect of English grammar because, in Indonesian, plural nouns are usually indicated by repetition (e.g., orang-orang) rather than by adding specific letters. In this research, it was found that 11 students, or 52.38%, made errors with singular and plural forms. Examples of these errors include:

Table 7. Analysis of Error on Singular/plural

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| There are five English teacher in my | There are five English teachers in my |
| school | school |

Data Analysis of Articles

An article is a small word which can cause a very large problem if it is used incorrectly. Basically, an article is an adjective which modifies a noun. From three kinds of article, students sometimes use it improperly. Based on this research, the writer found as much as 10 students or 47.61% who made errors on articles. Articles sound simple, but they are important because they modify nouns. There are two types of articles; indefinite and definite articles. Indefinite articles are generally used before nouns that are nonspecific, singular, and countable. The indefinite articles are "a" and "an". Use "a" before consonant sounds and use "an" before vowel sounds. Definite articles, such as "the" are used before specific nouns-nouns that are not countable. Errors that happened in the students descriptive writing related to the usage of articles were:

Table 8. Analysis of Error on Articles

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|----------------------------------|--|
| I have teacher | I have a teacher |
| Mr. Sumarna is a English teacher | Mr. Sumarna is an English teacher |

Students in writing the description often forgot to use the articles. Although they seemed small errors, but they were still important. As the examples above, the students did not use "an" before the vowels, instead they used "a".

Data Analysis of Sentence structure

Sentence structure as the grammatical arrangement of words in sentences. In other words, the sentence structure is what defines the way a sentence will look and sound. A sentence is a group of words which starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop (.), question mark (?), or exclamation mark (!). A sentence should contain or imply minimally a subject and a predicate. An object and an adverb are optional. In this research, the writers found 9 students who made the errors with the percentage 42.85%. The examples of the errors were:

Table 9. Analysis of Error on Sentence structure

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|---|---|
| He is a Humorist and kind teacher. | He is a humorous and kind teacher. |
| He always clothes tidily | He always wears his clothes tidily |

For the first sentence, there was no subject of the sentence. The second, there was no verb to explain the subject and the noun. Third, it needed the verb and fourth, the usage of auxiliary verb to support the negative form of simple present tense

Data Analysis of Spelling

When it comes to spelling and grammar mistakes, many students are unsure of the differences between the two of them. In fact, some may confuse the two or mix them up. The reason for this is that the differences between spelling and grammar mistakes may not be that obvious at times. For most people, it is very easy to speak very well or intelligently. Be that as it may though, whenever we ask the same person to spell what he or she said, they will usually end up making numerous spelling and grammar mistakes. Various words in the dictionary actually sound similar to others. Some words are often spelled differently than what they actually sound like. Silent letters can also cause problems for spellers and end up tripping people in their grammar. Still, while the speaker may not know how to spell either one of them, they will know when to properly use them in a sentence. In this research there were 7 students who made mistakes in spelling. Although it is simple, but if the students did not be careful, they would make many mistakes. The percentage was 33.33%.

Table 10. Analysis of Error on Spelling

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|--|--|
| He is fourty five years old now | He is forty five years old now |
| but I know that he is angry if only we | but I know that he is angry if only we |
| make mistic | make mistakes |

Data Analysis of Punctuation

Punctuation means making a few marks. It means putting the right kind of few marks in the right place to show the exact length and meaning of sentences. Proper punctuation is essential in written English to enable the reader to understand what a writer is trying to say. Spacing the punctuation correctly is also important to make the writing readable. Punctuation is the system of symbols that we use to separate written sentences and parts of sentences, and to make their meaning clear. Each symbol is called a "punctuation mark". Punctuation (or sometimes interpunction) is the use of spacing, conventional signs (called punctuation marks), and certain typographical devices as aids to the understanding and correct reading of written text, whether read silently or aloud. Punctuation is the practice, action, or system of inserting points or other small marks into texts in order to aid interpretation; division of text into sentences, clauses, etc., by means of such marks. In written English, punctuation is vital to disambiguate the meaning of sentences.

The rules of punctuation vary with language, location, register, and time and are constantly

evolving. Certain aspects of punctuation are stylistic and are thus the author's (or editor's) choice, or tachygraphic (shorthand) language forms, such as those used in online chat and text messages. In this research punctuation was at the bottom of the rank with the percentage 9.52%. Punctuation in writing is used as the 'separator' between ideas. Here are some mistakes made by students.

Table 11. Analysis of Error on Punctuation

| Incorrect sentences | Corrected sentences |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| He live in Tempel, Sleman, Yogyakarta | He lives in Tempel, Sleman, Yogyakarta |

Every sentence in English always begins with a capital letter and ends with full stop. They are used to differentiate one sentence from another. From the analysis above, it could be concluded that the grammatical errors was Subject Verb Agreement. Students in their writing still made mistakes for the subject and its verb agreement. Although actually in at a glance the sentences were understandable, but grammatically, they were kind of errors.

Teachers' Strategy to Improve the Students' Descriptive Writing

Based on the analysis of the students' descriptive writing, the most frequent grammatical error made by seventh-grade students was subject-verb agreement. Subject-verb agreement is the grammatical rule that requires the verb in a sentence to match the subject in number and person. In English, the verb needs to align with the number (singular or plural) and, in some cases, the person (first, second, or third) (Rochmadi, 2020).

Subject-verb agreement, also known as "subject-verb concord," involves matching the subject and verb in terms of tense, aspect, and mood (TAM), which translates to number, person, and gender. While English doesn't use grammatical gender (except for pronouns), only the verb "be" changes based on the person. Generally, subject-verb agreement in English focuses on quantity: a singular subject requires a singular verb, and a plural subject requires a plural verb.

Most subjects, except third-person singular, use the standard verb form in the present tense. For third-person singular subjects, students must use the singular verb form in the present tense, typically by adding -s or -es to the verb. If the verb ends in -x, -ss, -sh, -ch, -tch, or -zz, -es is added to match the third-person singular form. For verbs ending in a consonant + y, the y is replaced with -ies. Verbs ending in a vowel + y follow the regular pattern, adding only -s. These guidelines apply to both regular and irregular verbs, with the exception of the verb "be."

The verb "be" has many exceptions because it represents a general state of existence and serves as an auxiliary verb in continuous tenses. "Be" is the only verb that changes based on the person. When using "be," either alone or as part of a continuous tense, subject-verb agreement rules require matching both the number and the person.

Table 12. How to Conjugate Be in the Singular and Plural of Each Person

| | Singular | Plural | |
|---------------|------------------|------------|--|
| First Person | (I) am | (we) are | |
| Second Person | (you) are | (you) are | |
| Third Person | (he, she, it) is | (they) are | |

In English, there must be agreement between the subject and the verb in a sentence. If the subject is singular, the verb should also be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb should be plural as well. When the subject is a third-person singular noun or pronoun, the verb must also be singular. Students often face difficulties in matching the subject with the correct form of the verb, sometimes overlooking the appropriate agreement based on the subject.

This issue is supported by a study conducted by Surina and Kamaruzaman (2009), which states that the majority of students in Malaysia struggle with subject-verb agreement in their

writing. They emphasize that mastering grammar rules, especially subject-verb agreement, is crucial for all ESL learners. In English, a singular subject must be followed by a singular verb, and a plural subject requires a plural verb. This rule primarily applies to the simple present tense, while in the simple past tense, the main verbs 'was' and 'were' require reconsideration. Observations reveal that students often make mistakes in both the general and sub-rules of subject-verb agreement in their writing. An interview with an English teacher at Senior High School Al-Ghozali revealed that one effective method to improve students' descriptive writing is through continuous drills and exercises. This practice helps students become familiar with the forms and expressions needed for descriptive writing. These steps can be categorized into three stages: pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing.

Pre-writing is the most crucial step in the writing process. It involves generating ideas, determining the topic, and establishing the position or point of view for a target audience. During this stage, students should be given enough time to create a plan or develop an outline to organize their materials for the final product. Pre-writing activities prepare students to write by brainstorming ideas and sharing experiences (Cahyono & Rahayu, 2020). During the drafting stage, students produce their writing based on examples provided. The teacher's role is to guide students in writing style, organization, content, and presentation, as well as to encourage peer support. This stage involves converting thoughts into an organized text, following the standard essay structure of introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction provides context for understanding the thesis statement and defines key terms. The body consists of interconnected paragraphs that address minor arguments, contributing to the overall idea of the essay. The conclusion emphasizes the main points presented in the body paragraphs (Metaria & Cahyono, 2024). In the post-writing stage, students present their work to peers for feedback. The first draft is revised to refine accuracy, clarity, and logic. This process helps determine whether the arguments support the thesis statement. Editing focuses on improving sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. Authors may also combine wordy sections to enhance conciseness and use synonyms to vary word choice. Assessing the use of active and passive voice ensures a natural bias for active voice Therefore, continuous practice and drilling in writing are essential activities for teachers to improve students' descriptive writing skills.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has identified that the most common grammatical error made by tenth-grade students at Al Ghozali Senior High School is subject-verb agreement, with an occurrence rate of 90.47%. Other frequent errors include verb tense (66.66%), word class (57.14%), vocabulary (57.14%), singular/plural forms (52.38%), articles (47.61%), sentence structure (42.85%), spelling (33.33%), and punctuation (9.52%). These findings highlight specific areas where students struggle the most, providing valuable insights for educators to enhance their teaching strategies.

One limitation of this study is its focus on a single type of writing (descriptive) and a specific group of students (tenth graders at one high school). This narrow scope may limit the generalizability of the findings to other types of writing or different student populations. Future research could expand to include various writing types and a broader range of students from different schools and grade levels. Additionally, the study relies on written samples and interviews, which may not fully capture all factors influencing grammatical errors. Including observations and longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that teachers at Al Ghozali Senior High School and similar educational contexts implement targeted interventions focusing on the identified common errors. Continuous practice and drilling, particularly in subject-verb agreement and verb tense, should be emphasized. Teachers should also incorporate activities that enhance students' vocabulary and understanding of word classes. Moreover, integrating grammar instruction with writing practice can help students apply grammatical rules more effectively in their writing. By

addressing these areas, educators can significantly improve students' grammatical proficiency and overall writing skills.

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