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# The Implications of Written Malapropism in ELT [Implikasi Malapropisme Tertulis pada ELT]

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#### **Abstract**

In English Language Teaching (ELT) classes, teachers tend to be aware of checking the students' spoken and written errors. Malapropism is the use of an incorrect word that places a similar-sounding word that results in a nonsensical and humorous expression. This phenomenon occurs in spoken yet it is found in written communication. This research is focused on the phenomena of written malapropism produced by non-English department students during English language learning. The descriptive qualitative method is applied in this research due to its aim to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories of students' written malapropism. Class observation, notes taken, and the student's language ability background analysis are used to gather the data. The research showed that during one semester there were five grammatical errors in the form of written malapropism that occurred as the implication of students' lack of ability to understand English terms due to their inadequate vocabulary awareness.

**Keywords:** English language teaching; malapropism; sociolinguistic

#### **Abstrak**

Dalam suatu kelas pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris atau *English Language Teaching* (ELT), pengajar selalu menyadari dan memeriksa kesalahan siswa dalam berbahasa Inggris secara lisan maupun tulisan. Malapropisme adalah penggunaan kata

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kurang tepat yang menempatkan kata tersebut terdengar serupa sehingga menghasilkan ekspresi yang tidak sesuai namun terdengar menghibur. Malapropisme biasanya ditemukan dalam lisan, namun dapat juga terjadi dalam komunikasi tertulis. Penelitian ini difokuskan pada fenomena malapropisme tertulis yang dihasilkan oleh mahasiswa jurusan non-Bahasa Inggris selama pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris. Kualitatif deskriptif diterapkan dalam penelitian ini karena bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi karakteristik, frekuensi, tren, dan kategori malapropisme tertulis yang dihasilkan oleh mahasiswa. Observasi kelas, pencatatan yang diambil selama penelitian berlangsung dan analisis latar belakang bahasa mahasiswa digunakan kemampuan untuk mengumpulkan data. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa selama satu semester terdapat lima kesalahan gramatikal berupa malapropism tertulis yang terjadi sebagai implikasi dari kurangnya kemampuan siswa dalam memahami istilah-istilah bahasa Inggris karena perbendaharaan kosakata mereka yang kurang memadai.

**Kata Kunci:** Pembelajaran bahasa Inggris; malapropisme; sosiolinguistik

### INTRODUCTION

Several types of common grammatical errors happen in English Language Teaching (ELT) and one of them is called malapropism. Malapropisms, formerly known as malaprops, can add a comic effect and complexity to speech and written works. Malapropism is a confusing use of words in which an appropriate word is replaced by one with a similar sound but ridiculously inappropriate meaning (Hart, B., Lighter, J. E., & Sheidlower, 2003). Another definition stated by Mish, F. C. (2001) about malapropism is a humorous misuse or distortion of a word or a phrase, especially, the use of a word sounding somewhat like the one intended but ludicrously wrong in context. Dubinsky & Holcomb (2011: 37) define malapropisms as the replacement of one word or more (target) with a similar-sounding word (error). Malapropism is

categorized as slip of the tongue result which is usually used by entertainers purposely as a part of jokes to produce a humorous effect on the audience. The word Malapropism is defined as inappropriate or being in proper and it is taken from the French word which consists of "mal" and "approp" (Zvolenszky, 2015).

In written communications, students have adequate time to think and choose the appropriate words before forming it into a sentence then sending it to the teacher. However, some common errors happen during communication which confuse both teacher and student. The most common error made by the student is called Malapropism. Malapropism is known as common errors made in spoken instead of written, yet it does not mean impossible happens in written form. Malapropism is a phenomenon when the speakers accidentally make mistakes by misspoken or miswritten words because they sound alike but have different meanings which causes an amusing result.

Mendez, D.L., et al (2011) defined malapropism as the Archie Bunker syndrome and frontotemporal dementia viewed from the psycholinguistic aspects. Mostly, non-native English speakers or writers produced 80% of mistakes when they uttered English words during their first English class (A.Civera, 2013). The recent widespread adoption of WhatsApp, particularly among the younger generation, including college students, has raised significant concerns among stakeholders in the global education sector. These individuals are particularly worried about the potential impact of WhatsApp on students' academic performance. (Alsul ami, 2016; Ashiyan, Z., and Salehi, 2016; Awada, 2016; Ta'amneh, 2017; Yavuz, 2016).

Teaching English for a Specific Purpose (ESP) gives the greatest essential challenge for both teachers and students. The teachers of ESP are required to be more active in learning the new terms related to the student field study. They need to be aware in deciding the learning materials for non-English department students based on their needs such as English for Psychology. The scope of learning materials focused on Psychology terms which enclosed basic English vocabulary, writing,

reading, grammar, and speaking. By choosing the appropriate learning materials thoughtfully, the teacher builds the students' interest in learning English and support them to use English inside and outside the classroom. Applying this strategy is believed to increase the student's convenience in learning the language. However, most of the students prefer to use written communication rather than spoken communication due to their lack of confidence. They feel more comfortable producing written English using WhatsApp application (WA) rather than talking directly to the teacher.

Although it is not the first time the students of Psychology learned English, they are detected producing errors in writing a message through the WhatsApp application. In 2016, similar research was conducted by Supit (2016) to analyze the college students' grammatical errors while using BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) for communicating with the lecturer. Black Berry Messenger (BBM) was known as mobile instant-messenger which had similar features as in WhatsApp and it has been used for communicating for over the past decade. Another online application that is applicable for conducting online teaching learning is Google Classroom (GC). Google Classroom is a freely accessible online application designed for both teachers and students, spanning across schools and colleges. It facilitates virtual interactions, aiming to enhance communication and collaboration within the educational sphere. This platform enables students to engage in assignments with reduced paper usage, fostering a more organized approach to teaching and learning activities, as highlighted by Bell (2015). Despite its effectiveness and efficiency, many students were detected producing some grammatical errors while responding to the teacher's statement during the teachinglearning process in Google Classroom (GC). Several research related to the use of Google Classroom and its implications to the students' English language development were conducted by Indrayani (2022), Dewi et al. (2022), E.E.Sianipar & T.L. Gultom (2022), and Laili & Muflihah (2020) regardless to the in-dept discussion on the student's grammatical errors, such as, malapropism.

Based on Gricerian's theory there are three kinds of malapropisms (Unnsteinsson, 2017); First, Incidental malaprop that appeared accidentally when John Kerry, the presidential candidate for Democrats in 2004, giving a speech and uttered 'wasabi' instead of 'Wahhabi' that intended to a Muslim fundamentalist sect called 'Wahhabi. Second, Persistent malaprop as described by Reimer (2004) that described a colleague who persistently uttered 'obtuse' when he clearly meant that something was abstruse. Third, intentional malaprop as described by Davidson (2005) that cited an example where the speaker intentionally utters 'bae of wits' instead of 'battle of wits' for comic effect.

Written malapropism also happened almost in any aspect of life, including in public places. Some written malapropisms found in public places obviously had an unintended purpose as follows.



Figure 1. Public Written Malapropism (source: https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/10014837)

In picture 1 the word "incontinence" is a part of malapropism while the appropriate word should be "inconvenience". The word "incontinence" means lack of voluntary control over urination or defecation which totally difference with "inconvenience" which means a feeling of uncomfortable. This written malapropism happened because those two words; "incontinence" and "inconvenience" have the same parts of speech in the begin and end, and when it was uttered, they have exactly similar rhythm. This condition became the biggest issue of written

malapropism among people though some of them did it purposely to occur humorous effect for certain purpose.



Picture 2. Public Written Malapropism (source:https://twitter.com/heybillierae)

Another example of public written malapropism is in picture 2. The word "soup" is detected as malapropism which has meaning of liquid food while the actual word should be "soap" which has a meaning of a substance for cleaning or washing used with water. This far-meaning difference caused a humorous effect among the readers. This written malapropism happens because those two words; "soup" and "soap" have the same rhythm when it was uttered, and they have the same part of speech at the beginning and end of the words.

As per (Crystal, 2006), tongue slips involve unintentional deviations from a speaker's intended production of language units, including sounds, syllables, words, and occasionally other grammatical units. Malapropism, a unique and often humorous phenomenon, occurs when a word or phrase is mistakenly used due to confusion with a similar term, as highlighted by Zvolenszky (2015) and Davidson (2005). Davidson defines malapropism as the incorrect use of language, sometimes resulting in a humorous effect. This humor can be intentional, serving as a rhetorical tool, or unintentional, stemming from the speaker's lack of knowledge. Despite its frequency in everyday speech, malapropisms do not always hinder mutual understanding, as

people often grasp the intended meaning. The cause of malapropisms is often linked to a speaker's simultaneous consideration of different ideas, leading to a lapse in attention to the correct terms.

Grant and Harari (2005) propose that slips occur due to the simultaneous or conflicting action of two different intentions. In a psycholinguistic or linguistic explanation, these slips arise when a speaker or writer plans their language production, involving linguistic, grammatical, phonological, and semantic units. However, a slip happens when the articulatory mechanism fails to align with the cognitive plan, leading to unintended outcomes. For instance, a jealous woman might mistakenly say "I'm glad to beat you" instead of "I am glad to meet you."

The researcher supplemented the explanation with four relevant previous studies on malapropism. These include A.Civera (2013) study on the Spanish translation of Joseph Andrews, Mendez, D.L.'s (2011) research on malapropism as Archie Bunker Syndrome frontotemporal dementia, Zvolenszky (2015) study on metaphor and malapropism, and (Goldrick, M., Folk, J. R., & Rapp, 2010) research on individuals with neurological injuries causing malapropism. While all studies delve into malapropism, the fourth one uniquely explores both spoken and written malapropism, whereas the other three specifically focus on spoken instances.

This research is conducted to investigate the phenomena of students' malapropism based on the following research questions.

- 1. In what aspects of linguistics did the students produce mistakes based on the analysis of malapropism?
- 2. What caused written malapropism among the students?
- 3. How does the lecturer help the students to identify their mistakes and guide them to correct it?

## **Research Method**

The research methodology applied in this study is descriptive qualitative due to its aim to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends,

and categories of students' written malapropism. The most important stage in the research process is the selection of an appropriate approach to answer the research questions. The qualitative research involved grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography. A straightforward description of experiences and perceptions is frequently provided rationally as the use of a descriptive approach (Sandelowski M., 2010). A qualitative descriptive design may be deemed most appropriate as it recognizes the subjective nature of the problem, and the different experiences participants have and will present the findings in a way that directly reflects or closely resembles the terminology used in the initial research question (Bradshaw, C., Atkinson, S., & Doody, 2017).

Qualitative descriptive research, as defined by Doyle et al. (2020), focuses on generating data that describe the 'who, what, and where' of events or experiences from a subjective perspective. Aligned with constructionism and critical theories, this approach employs interpretative and naturalistic methods, acknowledging the dynamic and context-dependent nature of reality (Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, 1994). Descriptive qualitative research, associated with pragmatism, allows flexibility in research processes based on study aims and context, avoiding a rigid adherence to a particular methodology (Neergaard et al., 2009; Ritchie, et al., 2014). Pragmatist researchers, guided by the phenomena studied, choose methods most suitable for answering research questions (Yardley & Bishop, 2015)

Descriptive research commonly utilizes purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their relevance to research aims (Palinkas et al., 2015; Ritchie et al., 2014). Qualitative descriptive research employs diverse data collection methods to uncover the 'who, what, and where' of phenomena (Sandelowski, 2009). When choosing a descriptive design, researchers should explicitly justify their choice, particularly in studies exploring participants' experiences (Kim & Sefcik, 2017). Moleong (2001:11) underscores that language and action are the primary data in qualitative research. This approach aligns with constructionism, critical theories, and pragmatism, emphasizing the

dynamic and subjective nature of reality and the need for flexible and context-driven research processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Ritchie et al., 2014; Yardley & Bishop, 2015).

In this research, the researcher acted as the instrument to gain and gather the data then draw the conclusion. The primary data were gathered based on the class observation, notes taken, and the analysis of students' language ability based on the previous score on the last semester. The class of psychology is chosen due to the students' characters and capability in using English compared to other departments.

This research is conducted in Psychology class of 2021/2022 academic year. Psychology Department offers two courses for English program, namely English for Psychology I and English for Psychology II. English Psychology I is offered in the odd semester while English for Psychology II is offered in the even semester. This research is held in the second semester of English for Psychology II class. The second semester of Psychology students were selected due to their better ability in English compared to the first-semester students. In Psychology II class, there were 35 students that became the subject in this research. The class observations were conducted during the whole semester that consists of 14 meetings with a duration of 90 minutes for each. Since the research was conducted in COVID-19 pandemic period, the online teaching method was applied. It used written online learning applications called Google Classroom (GC) and WAG (WhatsApp Group). These learning applications were chosen due to their flexibility to facilitate the students' limitation. Most of the students lived out of town and frequently they had internet connection issues which made it difficult to join the live streaming class using other learning platforms such as Zoom, Google Meeting (GM), Webex, and so on. Google Classroom was considered more effective to handle this situation considering the students might access the classroom anytime when their internet connection was stable. In Google Classroom, both teacher and students are required to communicate in a written way although

sometimes teachers use double online learning applications, such as GC and GM at the same time to have a live streaming session with the students and written communication for those who inconvenienced to speak. The written online applications here; GC or WAG, gave adequate time for the students to choose and arrange the words then form them into a good sentence before sending them to the teacher. By using written communication, it is expected to build the students' awareness of grammar, punctuation, to avoid other grammatical errors, including malapropism. Therefore, the circumstance and the students' learning progress became the data during the class observation. Another method that has been applied in this research was note taken. The lecturer as the instrument made some notes on the students' errors during the teaching-learning process to analyze the issue behind the students' mistakes. Besides, the students' background language ability which is based on the students' first-semester score results became the secondary data to support the research.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

#### Results

Based on the research which was held in one semester with a total of 14 meetings and the duration of 90 minutes for each meeting, it was found that mostly, the students made mistakes in tenses, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary. However, written malapropism has also been detected during the teaching learning process and the moment when the students communicated with the teacher using WhatsApp application. The example of written malapropism was described in the following written conversation.

The first written utterance was noticed on 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 in WA communication.

"Please tell the captain of the class to contact me."

"Okay, Miss, I will massage him now."

The word "massage" is detected as malapropism which the actual word must be "message".

The second written utterance was noticed on 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 in WA Communication.

"Please submit your work by the end of this week."

"Yes, Mom. Thanks"

The word "mom" is detected as malapropism which the actual word must be "ma'am".

The third written utterance was noticed on 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 in WA Communication.

"You may leave your work on my table."

"Thanks you very much, miss."

The word "thanks" in "thanks you" were detected as malapropism and the actual word must be "thank you".

The fourth written utterance was noticed on 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2022 in GC Online learning application.

"Good evening, miss, I am sorry I'm latte"

The word "latte" is detected as malapropism and the actual word must be "late".

The fifth written utterance was noticed on 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2022 in GC Online learning application.

"It is an essential fart of understanding minority stress."

The word "fart" is detected as malapropism and the actual word must be "part".

The data above shows that most of the students' errors in language have been influenced by accidental mistakes during written communication. The first malapropism made by the captain of the class who had B score in his English for Psychology I in the first semester. It was quite surprising considering his score was good enough. Another possible reason was he did not pay much attention to the teacher's statement which resulted a lack of control over both his cognitive processes and manual dexterity. The second malapropism made by a student who had

a C score in his English for Psychology I. This condition showed that students' language competence influenced the students' way of communication. The second example of malapropism is detected in almost ESP classes for non-English department students. This phenomenon is influenced by fossilization as well. As stated by Cooper (2015) in a column on malapropism that fossilized words found in phrases frozen in time which made language moves much in the way of a glacier: slowly, constantly, and with a force impossible for any human intervention to halt. Fossilization in language happened when a speaker states wrong words or is misspoken or mispronounced but he had no idea how to correct it while other people thought it is the correct one. Therefore, people started to follow and use those words for years without knowing how to correct them. This phenomenon is a common issue that happens in English as foreign language class, and in Indonesia particularly.

The third malapropism pertains to a different type of malapropism, which has also become fossilized. People are usually misunderstood with the use of words "thanks" and "thank you". They thought it is allowed to use the word "thanks" with addition of "you". The student who did the error in malapropism number three was a student who had C score in English for Psychology I. Obviously, his low understanding in language influenced his way of thinking and decision in choosing the appropriate vocabulary. The fourth malapropism made by the student who had B score in her English for Psychology I. Even though she had an adequate understanding of the language, she made some errors. This condition happened when the student did not focus on the teacher's question and responded in hurry. The fifth malapropism happened because of the low ability of the student in understanding the context of learning material. It happened due to the students' lack of ability to understand a journal of psychology therefore she was unable to draw a conclusion, besides, her limited vocabulary in English became a concern issue.

## Discussions

Malapropism is a comical expression that occurs when a speaker inadvertently uses a wrong word with a similar sound, leading to grammatical errors. Unlike typos, where the mistake often results in a meaningless word, malapropisms involve the use of a word with a different meaning but a similar sound. This linguistic mix-up can create a humorous effect, especially if the intention was to evoke laughter. In a class English for Psychology II, students were expected to be more careful in choosing the word and arranging a sentence. The lecturer as a facilitator helped the students by giving leading questions to those who produced written malapropism, so that they noticed their mistakes. If the errors were detected as fossilization in language, the teacher corrected the student's mistakes by giving a brief explanation. Mostly, the lecturer responds by giving humorous input to give an opportunity for the students to notice their mistake and correct it by themselves. The lecturer's response to the malapropism produced by the students is briefly described as follows.

# First written malapropism

The first written utterance is detected on 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 via WA communication.

Student's malapropism:" Ok, Miss, I will <u>massage</u> him now."
Lecturer response: "Is he sick? So, you need to <u>massage</u> him?"
Student's revision: "Oh, I'm sorry, Miss. I mean I will message him."

The word "message" and "massage" have different sounds and pronunciations if they are spoken, but in written utterances, the students tend to pronounce them slightly the same therefore malapropism happens.

## Second written malapropism

The second written utterance is detected on 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 via WA communication.

Student's malapropism:" Yes, mom, thanks."

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Lecturer's response: "Please, don't call me mom, I never marry your dad. Mom refers to biological mother. Ma'am refers to madam/ a woman without any relative's relationship."

Student's revision: "Oh, I'm sorry, I mean, yes, ma'am, thanks."

The word "mom" and "ma'am" are usually interchangeable by the nonnative English speakers or writers which accidentally gave amusing effect. And due to their lack of phonetic skill, most of students think that the way to pronounce those words are the same which caused new problem which called fossilizations.

# Third written malapropism

The third malapropism noticed on 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 via WA communication.

Student's malapropism: "Thanks you very much, Miss"

Lecturer's response :" Thanks you very much or Thank you very much?"

Student's revision : "Oh, I'm sorry, I mean, <u>Thank</u> you, Miss."

In the example of written utterance above, the teacher reminds the student by giving the options of true and false sentence then allow the student to decide the correct one to revise his mistake.

## Fourth written malapropism

Fourth malapropism is detected on 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2022 on GC online learning application.

Student's malapropism: "Good evening, Miss. I am sorry, I am latte."

Lecturer's response : "Slurp. Latte or Cappuccino? I like both!"

Student's revision: "Oh, I'm sorry, Miss. I mean, Good Evening, Miss. I am sorry I am <u>late</u>."

From the written utterance above, it indicated that the student had difficulties in differentiating between two words "latte" and "late" either she lacks vocabulary or lack of pronunciations.

## Fifth written malapropism

Fifth malapropism is noticed on 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2022.

Student's malapropism: "It is an essential <u>fart</u> of understanding minority stress."

Lecturer's response : "Fart? How does it sound?"

Student's revision : "Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss. I mean It is an essential

part of understanding minority stress."

From the written utterances above, it indicated that the students did not have a deep understanding of the word she mentioned. This happened due to her lack of vocabulary and low ability in understanding the journal of Psychology as her assignment.

Based on the explanation above, it indicated that whether intendedly or unintendedly, mostly spoken, or written malapropism triggered a humorous effect on the listeners and readers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the finding and discussion above, a conclusion has been drawn to answer the research questions about malapropism. The written malapropism that produced by the college students was categorized as Incidental malaprop as stated in first Gricerian's theory (Unnsteinsson, 2017) since it occurred accidentally. This phenomenon happened due to the lack of college students' understanding of language. Another reason which caused written malapropism is because of the limited knowledge of students' vocabulary and terms. Mostly, the college students made mistakes in the aspect of common grammatical errors, such as inappropriate use of tense, articles, preposition and twisting homonym and synonym. It aroused mistakes on certain aspect of linguistic, such as phonetic, morphology, syntax, and semantics. If the students were able to identify the function of words in a sentence, a written malapropism could be prevented. The lecturer as the facilitator helped the students by sharing some clues to give them the opportunity to revise their mistakes. Sometimes, the lecturer shared humorous responses to comfort the students' feelings though he/she made some errors. It is important to increase the student's confidence after they

madtge errors. Another way to gain the college students' interest in learning the language is by providing vocabulary learning materials, it would make them selective in choosing the correct word. However, written malapropism teaches the college students to be more attentive in understanding before responding to the lecturer's questions so that it would minimize the mistakes in the future.

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