

An Investigation of the First Year Students' Common Writing Problems through Self Report Paragraph: A Reflection

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Abstrak. penelitian ini bertujuan untuk membahas kesulitan-kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh para mahasiswa semester pertama FKIP Bahasa Inggris Universitas Jember dalam menulis komposisi bahasa Inggris di dalam kelas. subyek penelitian ini adalah 37 mahasiswa Writing 1. Data diambil dari tugas akhir yang berupa paragraf yang berisi permasalahan mahasiswa yang paling menyulitkan ketika mereka menulis dalam bahasa Inggris. Hasil penelitian ini pula dipakai sebagai refleksi pembelajaran bagi guru selama satu semester pembelajaran writing 1. Berdasarkan hasil analisa dari paragraph yang ditulis mahasiswa didapatkan enam jenis permasalahan paling pokok yang dirasa sangat menyulitkan bagi mahasiswa ketika menulis bahasa Inggris. Kosakata (vocabulary), struktur bahasa Inggris (grammar), ide pokok (main idea), isi (content), organisasi ide (organization), dan permasalahan psikologi penulis (writer's block) adalah enam hal yang dirasa mahasiswa sangat menyulitkan mereka dalam proses menulis. Dengan mengetahui permasalahan yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa dapat memberikan input yang sangat berguna bagi guru dalam mempersiapkan materi pembelajaran pada pembelajaran berikutnya sekaligus dapat membantu para mahasiswa meningkatkan kemampuan menulis mereka.

Kata kunci: permasalahan menulis, paragraf, mahasiswa baru, persepsi siswa,

Introduction

Writing is one of the four skills in English that is needed to master by every language learner who wishes to be able to communicate effectively in English. Through writing, people will be able to tell any information and share vision from long distance, for instance by e-mail or letter. Besides, it helps people document a lot of important things during meeting or when they are attending classes. Moreover, in educational context, writing is a familiar medium to be used as a way to measure learners' proficiency whether for linguistic competence or other cognitive aspects, such as TOEFL, GRE or proposal for scholarship application. In accordance with it, Harmer (2004:3) states that most exams in education setting, whether to test language proficiency or other skill, often rely on the students' writing competence in order to measure their knowledge.

According to Nunan (1991: 87) writing is seen as the most troublesome subject/skill to learn due to its complicated process. Therefore, he added that writing is

considered as the last skill to acquire. In line with it, Myles (2000) said that writing is a complex skill which acquires many aspects covering linguistic competence, cognitive, social factor. To be able to write learners must possess an adequate linguistic knowledge which assists them to compose grammatically correct sentences. Besides, it helps them to choose correct words to express their ideas clearly and meaningfully. In order to write, a student needs enough knowledge about the topic whis is going to be written. In this case, cognitive aspect plays an important role. With different background knowledge, a writer must struggle to cope with the topic and how to organize it smoothly. In addition, to know how to utilize cohesive devices as well as to recognize kinds of writing genre also influences the writing process. Having problem with all of these elements might effect learners' motivation to write. When motivation is low, learners might loose their interest on their writing class and the consequence is teacher has more problems to solve. Therefore, to know students' difficulties in writing is very important as it may help teacher to find the most suitable ways to teach writing and provide students with the most appropriate examples to learn.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher is interested in conducting a study in investigating the problems faced by students during the writing 1 instruction as a reflection of the writing instruction that has been conducted the whole semester. Another reason why this study is conducted at the end of the class is to make sure that the students already have more experience in English writing process. And for the last reason is to know if they are aware of their weaknesses in writing and at the same time recognize it as the problems that need to be given more attention in order to improve their writing performance in the future.

The Nature of Writing

Traditionally language skills are divided into four major skills namely listening, reading, speaking and writing. The first two skills, listening and reading, are considered as a receptive skill while speaking and writing are classified as productive skill. As productive, skills both speaking and writing are seen to have same similarities and dissimilarities as well. There are some differences that are listed by Weigle (2002: 14) which might as well be used to explain the nature of writing as a written language.

The first characteristic of written language according to Weigle (2002:14) is that writing is a permanent language record which can be read and reread over time. By

the development of technology now people are able to save his written work and be read later in the future. A piece of writing is has a trace that can be found and reread by others for many purposes.

The second trait of writing is that it takes time to be produced (Weigle, 2002:14). Compared to speaking, writing needs more efforts to finalize the work. As writers need the plan, review and revise their work. As a means of communication, writing must carry certain message to be delivered to its readers. Without any particular topic, a writer must not be able to compose any information in his writing since he does not know what to present to the readers. For this purpose, Writers need to spend some time to plan what they are going to say in their writing. Having done with the topic, writers must figure out the best way in presenting the ideas for the sake of fulfilling the purpose of the writing. Besides that, a piece of writing takes time to produce because the writer and readers are separated by time and space. In other words, writing by its nature is not meant for face to face interaction as it is why distance between the writer and reader become the one of the feature of written language.

The distance which occur in time and space between writer and reader makes the process of writing is more complicated as writer must avoid implicit/ambiguous expression in his/her writing. Writers have to be sure that all their ideas must be clearly understood by the readers in order to minimize misunderstanding among them as they do not share the same context. In line with it, Nunan (1991: 83) said that language cannot be separated by the context and the purpose why the language is used. It means when writer and reader do not share immediate context, readers may face difficulties in understanding the intention of the writer. The orthography aspects such as intonation, stress, volume, pausing and pitch, etc which cannot be directly shown by the writer must be presented correctly in written expression. Weigle (2002:16) stated that written language has limited amount of information compared to spoken language which has rich of devices available. It also causes the complexity in the use of language. Therefore, writing is usually known to have longer clauses with more subordinators than spoken form. Consequently, the degree of formality in writing is quite high because it considers the difference of social and cultural aspects of the readers.

In brief, the nature of writing more or less has made the process of teaching and learning of writing especially in the second language makes it more difficult to do for both the student and the teacher.

The Second Language Writing Teaching and Learning

To write either in the first or second language is still regarded as a challenging task to do by anyone. Richard (1995: 100) said that due to its complicated process, only a few of people who manage to write well. To write means to compile all knowledge in the linguistic, social and cognitive that a writer has in meaningful written information. Not only have to know the rule or system of the language in order to create correct structure and also have enough background knowledge on the topic are the minimum requirement that a writer must have.

Due to the much effort that students need in order to be able to write well, the second writing instructor plays a crucial position in choosing the most appropriate approach for the class. There are many approaches that a teacher might choose to teach writing skill such as communicative language teaching (CLT), process-based approach, product-based approach, genre-based approach, etc, and each of which has its own strengths and drawbacks. Therefore, the teacher should carefully select the approach and make sure to know which approach that suits well in the class. Besides choosing the correct approach, a writing instructor probably becomes the only reader that reads the writing and becomes the only reviewer who gives feedback to the students' writing.

Writing instructor plans the classroom activities in teaching how a writing process should be done. As what Gao (2007) said that writing by the nature is a process. In other words, there are some processes that take place when a student writes his/her text. There are certain procedures which writers usually do before the writing (planning), whilst writing and after writing (re-write). It is claimed that writing is a recursive process (Shaughnessy, 1977; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Zamel, 1983, and Hedge, 1988), which allows students to go back and forth while writing in order to support their ideas. Thus, writing is not a linear process which allows writers proceed the process each step by step and not necessarily looking back to the previous step.

To compose writing, writers usually start with a plan which they want to discuss and then put themselves as the readers of the writing during the phase of revision. Writers need to consider the rhetoric that they use in order to meet the requirement of

the readers' expectation. Since the purpose of writing is to be read, the writer should put aside their personal meaning and rather fulfill the need of their readers by giving what the readers would be able to understand. Hence, the choice of the expression should be matched with the context, purposes and readers/culture (Zeng in Gao 2007). This is why writing instructor needs to teach how a piece of writing should be written. In this case, writing should not only be focused on the application of correct grammatical sentence structure, but it must be treated as a process of creativity which requires a writer to actively engage all his/her knowledge in order to be able to communicate his/her ideas to the readers. Thus, by simply putting much attention on the students' grammatical error and leave the purpose of writing as communicative expression, the objective of teaching writing will not be achieved because students perhaps only consider writing as one of the subjects that they have to take in order to pass the class.

In sum, the purpose of teaching writing is to make the students knowledgeable in expressing ideas in written form. For that, during the teaching learning process students are not only learn to write correct structure but also be able to transfer the ideas coherently as it is expected by the readers by using proper lexis for each different situation and culture. For that writing is not easy for anyone especially the second language writer as Weigle (2002:16) said that second language learners might be disadvantaged by their limited linguistic sources.

The Aspects of Writing

Writing involves many different aspects which every student needs to learn and comprehend. These aspects cover organization, content, grammar, punctuation/ spelling/ mechanics, and style and quality of expression/ vocabulary (Brown & Baily, in Brown, 2004: 244). These diverse elements are quite burdensome for second language learners to learn as they must combine all of them in order to compose a text.

Organization is one aspect of writing which addresses logical arrangement of information. In other words, a good paragraph must be unified and coherent. A unified paragraph is the paragraph that only discusses one idea or topic sentence in one paragraph and all the supporting sentences only tells about it (Oshama and Hogue, 2006:18). When there is unrelated idea included in the paragraph then it lacks of unity. On the other hand, coherence deals with the flow of the information. How one idea is smoothly delivered from one sentence to the next is very much the coverage of

coherence. Moreover, coherence according to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2001: 148) is a feature related to three participants in the interactive process: the writer, the written text and the reader. The three elements of coherence, thus, imply that there is incorporation among the three of them which deal with the way how a writer should deliver his/her ideas in order to make it sense to the readers. What is meant by make sense for the readers is logically understandable. One of the ways of how ideas can be coherently connected is by using cohesive devices such as conjunction, substitution, repetition, etc.

The content of writing is the subject or message that is tried to be conveyed by the writer to the readers. According to Camp (2001: 290) the content of a composition must have clarity, conciseness and completeness. To deliver a clear message to readers, all the ideas or expression used in the writing must not vague or ambiguous. The writer should avoid implicit statement which might cause misunderstanding. A good writing also deals with the completeness of ideas. A paragraph or essay is considered to be complete when all the supporting sentences have described all the idea that has previously mentioned in the topic sentence.

Fairbairn and Winch (1996:108) stated that grammar is the guidance consisting of set of rules used to help writers to construct sentences which make sense and are in acceptable English. Using correct grammatical sentences in writing is a must in academic setting as writing is usually used as means of evaluation in this area. A piece of writing with poor grammar will influence the meaning of the sentences and make the readers confused. Without correct using of grammar, a sentence will be meaningless as it is only a collection of words that are lined up together. For English sentences Fairbairn and Winch (1996: 109) highlighted few basic points in constructing correct English sentences. The first point that every writer must remember that English sentence must have at least a subject and predicate. Making sure that the verb agrees with the noun or pronoun is the second thing. The third, as English serves 16 tenses in its system consistency in using these tenses in the sentences are highly required; otherwise it influences the meaning of the sentences. The last pointed by them is to make sure that there are no crucial or grammatically significant words such as irregular -ed ending missing.

Diction or word choice is also another important aspect that might be claimed as one of the most troublesome point in composing a piece of writing. Wingersky et al.(1998:55) classifies eight vocabulary namely noun, verb, adverb, preposition, pronoun, conjunction, article, and adjective. As second/foreign language learners, memorizing so many different words will be tiring especially when they are not aware of the English word formation or class. There is a tendency showing that second/foreign language learners produce shorter and simpler sentences in writing compared to the native speakers. It is believed to occur because the lack of vocabulary range that second language learners have. In addition, vocabulary can influence the tone or the style of a writer in expressing his/her ideas. By having limited vocabulary range, a writer might not be able to communicate his/her message freely or effectively as they do not have enough vocabulary to help him/her to do that.

The last aspect of writing is mechanic which according to Cali (<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/few/679>) is the convention of written language covering punctuation, capitalization and spelling. She added as because these conventions do not exist in oral communication, students have to learn consciously learn how mechanics function in written language. By the absence of contextual clues such as intonation or stress, writer must be able to know how to replace them with correct written language symbols. The writer need to know the basic use of comma, full stop, capital letters and other symbol in order to make the sentence correctly read. As the development of technology, today's learners do not need to suffer from the lack of mechanic skill as there is program in MS word that will help them correcting their mechanics. The program will identify error in mechanic by giving some sign that the word is not correctly written or that there is some missing punctuation in there.

Method

The subjects of the study were the 37 first year students of the English program of FKIP of Jember University who joined writing 1 class C. They wrote a self report paragraph which tells about the difficulties that they face during the process of writing. The task must be completed within 120 minutes.

The procedures that were used in analyzing the data were explained in the following steps. First, the researcher read all the paragraphs and listed all the problems reported by the students in their writings. The second, the researcher identified the

number of the each problem that had been mentioned by the students in their paragraphs. The third, calculating the number of each problem to answer the problem of the study.

Result and Discussion

The result of the analysis highlights some points that students consider to be the most troublesome parts in writing English composition. There are six common problems which are listed by the students in their self report paragraphs.

Among the six elements of writing that the students feel very difficult to handle is vocabulary. The data showed that 23 out of 37 students mentioned that vocabulary/diction is the the most troublesome component that they encounter during the writing process. That they have a limited range of vocabulary is described as the major dilemma of why these students mostly choose vocabulary in the first part. The position of vocabulary in language learning is very important. Without enough vocabulary storage, a speaker will not be able to produce neither oral nor written language since s/he can express her/his intention in a comprehensible way.

According to Nation (2001:14) it needs 15,000 up to 20,000 high frequency-words for an EFL learner to acquire in order to make them easier to produce oral or written language. Nation (2001:14) by analyzing certain text generalizes the types of vocabulary into four majors namely, high frequency-word, academic words, technical words and low frequency-word. Among these four types of vocabulary, the high frequency-word appears to be the one that should be learned as it turns to be the ones that mostly needed in producing a good speech or written form. In other words, it seems that the size of high frequency words that these students have is not large enough so that it influences the way how they compose the writing and consequently inhibits them in expressing their ideas easily and clearly. The topic of the writing, however, might give impact in the fluency of their writing since they have less burden and enough knowledge on the task that is being asked in the prompt. Huang (2008: 4) finds out that the level of difficulty in writing is based on the familiarity of topics that students have to write. The more familiar the topic is, the easier they feel the burden to write. It is in line with what the researcher sees from the students' work. During the teaching learning process, students seemed more convenient to write when they had tasks/topic that refer to personal matters like what they had for their last writing task which was talking about

their own problems faced in writing English. The vocabulary chosen are able to express their intention and give quite clear meaning to what they want to say to readers, although, it still had some run on sentences or language error. Lim (2010) mentions that test takers are likely to write more easily when the topic deals specifically with their subject of study rather than something that is too general. In this case, the students have enough facts or knowledge to describe.

For the second problem that the student point out is grammar. As many as 20 students say that they have problem in grammar. As the English grammar is not similiar to Indonesian in many ways, most of the time, they are confused about the structure of the sentence. So, it becomes the source of their error. There are two kinds of error sources in EFL context namely interlingual and intralingual transfer. The interlingual error is triggered by the influence of the mother tongue structure which tends to interfere during the process of internalizing the new system of target language. Whereas the latter deals with incomplete comprehension of the new rule of the L2 so that it causes double usage of certain rule such as the use of "be" in verbal sentence for instance; she is go to school every day. It particularly occurs when a learner has not mastered the rule completely (Richards in Ratna: 2013). Dealing with those errors most students commonly have problem with tenses, article, verb and preposition. Omission oof article and incorrect selection of singular verb might likely to occur in the paragraph because Indonesian' structure does not differentiate plural or singular nor must use article before noun. This error indicates that there is an interference of L1 rule into L2. In line with it, an interlingual error is something that commonly found in EFL writing. The interlingual error happens because student normally relies on their L1 rule in producing sentences in the target language. The native language interference usually causes some errors in lexis, syntax and discourse (Kaweera, 2013).

How to make a good topic sentence reaches 18 votes and became the third major common problem that is troublesome to handle. Topic sentence introduces readers to what the writer would like to say in his/her paragraph as well as limit the topic to specific area which only be discussed in one paragraph only (Oshima and Hogue, 2006:3). Therefore, a paragraph only has one topic sentence. In students' paragraphs they reported that they were still confused about what was meant by an effective topic sentence. Either they have a broad topic or a fact is usually the examples of how they

still figure out what a good topic sentence is. Students already learn that most topic sentence commonly found in the initial sentence of a paragraph but what make them difficult to understand is to formulate a good one. This finding is also being highlighted by Khansir, Ahrami & Hajivandi (2013) which count that students make more errors in using topic sentence among the three elements of writing; topic sentence, supporting sentences and closing sentences.

To deal with the content/body of a paragraph for sure require not only familiarity of the topic but also good critical thinking so that the subject matter being discussed is relevant and well developed. This refers to the cognitive aspect that every writer will encounter in every writing process. As many as 16 students wrote that they had problem in developing the ideas. To make a unified and complete work is not an easy job especially when it is the first experience to write. They feel that they do not know what and how long they have to write the topic that they are assigned. In this case, they rely on their intuition to consider that they have written enough sentences in a paragraph instead of seeing it as a comprehensive paragraph. In other words, a good paragraph must have sufficient information/supporting sentences that support or prove the thesis. If there are not enough sentences to develop the main idea, it means that the paragraph is incomplete. It is not the length of the paragraph that determines the quality of the paragraph but the completeness. A paragraph should not be neither too long or too short (Trinity College of Bible Theology Seminary). In this case, instead of having a thorough paragraph, they tend to have a very short paragraph or long one. With a short paragraph usually they are not able to express the relation of the ideas well while with a long paragraph they are likely to repeat the same ideas many times.

Another problem encounter by the students is organizing the ideas. How to order the content of the paragraph relates to the way the writer arranges the ideas into coherent and cohesive paragraph. The Coherence of a text could be achieved through the usage of cohesive devices since coherence covers the smoothness of the ideas are presented in the writing. Writer must be able to present the idea in logical manner and avoid jumping from one topic to another without having transition signal (Oshima and Hogue, 2006: 25). Dealing with this, there are 13 students who believed that they have poor knowledge in organizing their ideas.

Beside some technical problems some students also mentioned about their psychological matter which generally called as writer's block or writer's anxiety. Writer's block refers to a condition when a writer is pessimistic and has negative feeling toward writing. According to Soedjatmiko and Widiati (<http://journal.teflin.org/index.php/teflin/article/viewFile/148/34>) a writer might face what is called as writer block even in the pre writing phase such getting the idea, choosing the right words up to how to organize them in their composition. In this study, there are five students who said that they undergo this psychological problem when they have to write. There is no specific reason why they feel this mental block as they just said that they were not in the mood to write anything. During the teaching learning process, most of the time students are permitted to wonder around the class and have a chat to discuss things deal with their writing with their friends or teacher in order to build a positive atmosphere in the class. This is supposed to help students build a convenient atmosphere to make them able to jot down some ideas and cease the fear of being forced to write as good as in their L1. Gkonou (<https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/10593/2138/1/SSLLT%201%282%29%20267-281%20Gkonou.pdf>) stated that students can even start to write from any part they like as long as they are able to create a complete paragraph later on. But, it seems that this phenomenon somehow cannot be avoided completely as writing is a complex process which also includes the readiness of the writer's mental in the process.

Conclusion

Writing is a long and complicated process that many aspects of competence need to be combined in order to compose a good paragraph. The study found six elements of paragraph writing that these English freshmen consider problematic to deal with and each of which connected each other. By having known the problems that bother students the most, a writing instructor will be able to get some informative insight to help his/her students deal with it and plan a more effective material for the class.

Besides the common problems deal with linguistics and cognitive things, a psychological matters might need to be considered as well since learning a new language sometimes gives a hard time for the students so that they experience the language anxiety. This phenomenon usually influences the process of writing as well.

Unable to write any single sentence or having a hard time to find ideas up to how to organize the ideas into sentences are some of the results that can be seen as the indicators of having writing anxiety or writer's block.

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