

ASSESSING UNITY, COHERENCE AND WORD USAGE IN STUDENTS' WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This research was done to find out whether unity, coherence, and word usage were used appropriately by students in writing paragraphs in English, the error made most by these students in constructing their paragraphs and the lecturer's insight in her students' writing errors. This study uses a qualitative research format, where all the data are described in a systematic way based on the research questions. A number of 21 second year students from the English Department in a university in Banda Aceh were the sample of this research. To obtain the data, the writer used a test. She also interviewed the lecturer to gain more understanding on her students' writing errors. The findings showed that some students did not use unity, coherence, and word usage appropriately in writing their paragraphs. Most errors were made in word usage (137 errors or 79%). Students made errors in spelling and also omitted words and letters. There were 30 errors of unity (17%) and 9 errors of coherence (5%). It was found that many errors they made were influenced by their mother tongue, and were also caused by their difficulties in learning English. Thus, it can be concluded that many of the students made errors because of interlingual and intralingual transfers. Furthermore, the lecturer believed that her students made errors because they lacked enthusiasm, motivation and rarely did their writing exercises. For that reason, lecturers should know and understand the errors in their students' writing so that they can provide appropriate remedies to resolve the problems faced by their learners.

Key Words: *Writing, Unity, Coherence, Word Usage.*

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INTRODUCTION

Many people want to express their feelings, thoughts, and ideas in writing, but they can rarely create them well. Besides, writing is challenging for some people, especially for novice writers (Zhang, 2010) or those who do not know how to organize their writing, and how to produce good writing. It is believed that writing is very difficult, thus the students need to pay great attention, and have a comprehensive understanding to organize sentences in order to be able to deliver their ideas, messages and feeling to the reader through writing, especially when writing in English as a second or foreign language.

As writing is hard to produce, there are some elements that are necessary to comprehend in order to produce good writing. Based on a preliminary study on students in a university in Banda Aceh, the elements most students face problems are in maintaining unity, coherence and correct word usage or collocation in the writing. These elements are important in writing (Duan & Qin, 2012; Oshima & Hogue, 1999) since they can make the writing interesting and hence the reader can more easily catch the ideas of the writer. Thus, some students make many errors in these elements. Therefore, it is important to assess the writing of these students to find out the most errors they made and then show them how to correct or avoid the errors that they were making.

Hence, the purpose of assessing writing done by students is to help the students to learn. They can learn to understand the nature of errors in writing, and also to learn the rules of composition, collocation and grammar and hence hopefully to avoid such errors in the future. Additionally, Brown (2004:445) states that assessment is a long term process which takes in a much wider domain. He further says that at any time a student answers a question, makes a comment or tries to use a new word or structure. A written exercise such as written down a phrase in a formal essay is referred to a performance as a final point kept assessed by the student himself, teacher, and possibly other students.

Many studies have been conducted on the errors from elements of writing by students. A study conducted by Natalina (2011) concluded in the findings of her study that students make errors in their writing because they lack knowledge of English grammar, they over-generalize the form of words, they do not pay attention to word order and

singular-forms because they are influenced by their native language or interlingual transfer, and because they don't understand the context. Moreover, Hermiza (2012) states that students often make development errors, write ambiguously and/or make interlingual and/or intralingual errors. The highest number made, however, are interlingual errors according to the research that was done by Kaweera (2013). The findings of this study indicated that errors found in Thai student writing are mainly influenced by both interlingual and intralingual effects.

Thus, in this study, the researcher focused her research on unity, coherence, and word usage in writing done by her students by directly analyzing the writing done by them. And so, the problems of this study can be clearly formulated in the following two questions:

1. Which type of errors in unity, coherence, and correct word usage was made the most by students when writing their paragraphs?
2. Which source the errors were from based on interlingual transfer, intralingual transfers, and the mother tongue interference?
3. What are the insights from the lecturer on her students' writing errors?

In line with the two research problems, the aims of this research are to find out whether unity, coherence, and word usage were correctly done by the students when they wrote their paragraphs. Furthermore, it is to find out which of the errors of unity, coherence and word usage were made the most by the students when they wrote their paragraphs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Assessment

Assessing student work is vital to determine if the students concerned have attained important skills and knowledge. This is especially true for writing because this is both knowledge and skill based. According to Omaggio (1986:263) teacher responses to students' written composition has typically taken two forms: (1) corrective feedback on the micro level, and (2) an overall evaluation in the form of a grade.

According to Weir (1993:17), reliability in assessing the writing ability of students refers to taking enough samples of their work. The more evidence teachers have of their ability, the more confident they can be in the judgment of that ability. Brown (2004:218) says that assessment of writing is not a sample task. When considering assessing writing ability, the objectives and criteria for evaluation need to be

clear. There are two major aspects to be assessed: linguistic factors and non-linguistic factors (Kim & Lee, 2010). Linguistics factors refer to collocation, grammar, content, organization, word choice, and mechanics. While non-linguistic factors refers to the ideas expressed by the students.

The Elements of Writing

Bailey (2006:66) says that the elements of writing are the various skills that are needed for most types of academic writing, whether it is a short report, a long essay or a dissertation. Besides, writing produces new knowledge and makes new meaning. It is a good combination of several elements that makes for good writing. Especially, when a writer can combine the communication of ideas and facts and place the use of words precisely in writing i.e. exhibit good collocation. Walker (2010:3-14) also lists five elements of good writing, they are: purpose, audience, clarity, unity, and coherence. These elements produce good writing. The next section discusses only on the focus of this study, which are unity, coherence and word usage.

Unity

Writing is a way of expressing ideas. These ideas should usually be expressed clearly and straight to the point. Therefore, when someone expresses his ideas, they should be related to the topic sentence. Oshima and Hogue (1999:30) note that unity means that a paragraph discusses one and only one main idea from the beginning to the end. The second part of unity is that every supporting sentence must directly explain and support the main idea as stated in the topic sentence. Any information that does not directly support the topic sentence should not be included. Clearly, the paragraph will be unified if all the details in it support the points in the topic sentence. They affirm that the paragraph should only discuss one main idea and every supporting sentence should justify the main idea that is stated in the topic sentence. In brief, unity in writing is the connection of all ideas to a single topic, where all the supporting sentences should relate to the topic sentence.

Coherence

In good writing all the ideas are conveyed logically and the writing flows smoothly in building up the main idea. The supporting ideas and sentences must be organized in a consistent way so that they cohere. Oshima and Hogue (1999:40) say another element of a good paragraph

is coherence. In order to have coherence in writing, the sentences must hold together; that is, the movement from one sentence to the next must be logical and smooth. There must be no sudden jumps. Each sentence should flow smoothly into the next one. They further explain that there are four ways to achieve coherence. The first two ways are *repeating key nouns* and *using pronouns* that refer back to the key nouns. The third way is to use *transition signals* to show how one idea is related to the next. The fourth way to achieve coherence is to arrange your sentences in *logical order*.

In summary, coherence is a product of many different factors, which are combined to make every sentence contribute to the meaning of the whole piece. Coherence refers to the unity created between the ideas by the succession of sentences. Each sentence should flow smoothly into the next one. Ideas that are arranged in a clear and logical way are coherent.

Word Usage

Word usage or collocation is how a word, phrase, or concept is used in a language. It is about how to choose an appropriate word in order to write sensibly so that the reader can catch the meanings or the point of the writing. Langan (2010:385) divides word use into several parts, they are: dictionary use, spelling improvement, omitted words and letters, commonly confused words, and effective word choice. Thus, in this study the researcher is only discussing spelling improvement, and omitted words and letters.

Langan (2010:402) offers seven steps that can be taken to improve spelling, which are:

- Step 1: Use a dictionary. Better still, the researcher recommends using several dictionaries via: English to Indonesian, Indonesian to English, and English to English.
- Step 2: Make word notes in a Personal Diary.
- Step 3: Master commonly confused words and homonyms.
- Step 4: Use a Spell-Checker in a computer program or an advanced hand phone that can connect to the internet
- Step 5: Understand basic spelling rules like “i” before “e” except after “c”.
- Step 6: Remember the rules for plurals especially plural nouns e.g. ‘data’.
- Step 7: Master a basic word list.

Langan (2010) also says to be careful about not leaving out words or letters when writing. The omission of words such as *a, an, of, to, or the* or the *-s* ending needed on some nouns or verbs may confuse or amuse readers. They may not want to read what they regard as careless work.

The Source of Error in Writing

Richards (1971) differentiates between three sources of error. The first source of error is called 'interference error', which results from mother tongue interference. The second source, 'intralingual error', reflects the incorrect generalization of the rules within the target language. The last source is 'developmental errors', occurring when the learners hypothesize about the target language based on limited knowledge of it. Wilkins (1972) adds another source, that is the 'mother tongue interference' that is always found when students learn a foreign language. Since this study only focus on the interlingual and intralingual transfers, and as the study is on foreign language learners, therefore mother tongue interference is also investigated. The following section only discusses the relevant sources in focus.

Interlingual Transfer

Interlingual transfer is a significant source of errors for new language learners. It is an error due to the influence of the mother tongue or first language of the student. Richards (1992) defined interlingual errors as being the result of language transfer, caused by the first language of the learner. However, this should not be confused with a behaviouristic approach of language transfer. Error analysis does not regard them as the persistence of old habits, but rather as signs that the learner is internalizing and investigating the system of the new language.

Interlingual errors may occur at different levels such as transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical and lexic-semantic elements of the native language into the target language and mistranslation due to inadequate build-up of collocational references.

Intralingual Transfer

Interference from the first language is not the only reason for committing errors. Ellis (1997) has stated that some errors seem to be universal, reflecting attempts to make the task of learning and using the target language simpler. Use of past tense suffix '-ed' for all verbs is an

example of simplification and over generalization. These errors are common in the speech of second language learners, irrespective of their mother tongue.

Intralingual errors result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer. They may be caused by the influence of one target language item upon another. For example, learners attempt to use two tense markers at the same time in one sentence since they have not mastered the language yet. When they say: "He is comes here", it is because the singularity of the third person requires "is" in present continuous, and "-s" at the end of a verb in simple present tense. Furthermore, Selinker (1972) concludes that there are five sources of errors as follows:

1. *Language transfer*. There is positive transfer that helps the learning of second language. There is also negative transfer that hinders the learning of second language. Language transfer involves pronunciation, word order and grammar, semantic transfer, transfer in writing, pragmatic transfer and culture transfer.
2. *Transfer of training*. Transfer of training occurs whenever the effects of prior learning influence the performance of a later activity. Transfer of training is the influence of prior learning on performance in a new situation.
3. *Strategies of second language learning*. This is an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language.
4. *Strategies of second language communication*. This consists of attempts to deal with a problem of communication that have arisen in interaction.
5. *Overgeneralization of the target language (TL) linguistic material*. This happens when a second language learner applies a grammatical rule across all members of a grammatical class without making or knowing the appropriate exceptions.

Ellis (1994) further adds that errors happens when the deviation arises as a result of the lack of knowledge, and an error cannot be self-corrected.

Mother Tongue Interference

Scovel (2001:51) states that "the confusion (that) a language learner experiences when confronting patterns within the structure of a newly acquired language, irrespective of how the target language patterns might contrast with the learner's mother tongue". Mother tongue

interference is always found when students learn a foreign language. Wilkins (1972) observed that when learning a foreign language an individual already knows his mother tongue, and these errors occur which he attempts to transfer. The transfer may prove to be justified because the structure of the two languages is similar. In that case, there is a 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation' or it may prove unjustified because the structures of the two languages are different. In that case there is a 'negative transfer' or interference.

The process in which incorrect linguistic features or errors become a permanent part of the way in which a person uses a language is called fossilization. Nakuma (1998) stated that fossilization is a term used to denote what appears to be a state of permanent failure on the part of an L2 learner to acquire a given feature of the target language. On the other hand, Richards (1992) regarded interlanguage as the kind of language that has aspects that are borrowed, transferred and generalized from the mother tongue of the user. It is the type of language produced by second language and foreign learners who are in the process of learning a language.

Kinds of Surface Taxonomy in Writing

Surface taxonomy is the ways in which surface structures are changed (Dulay & Burt, 1982). Accordingly, there are omissions, additions, misformations, and misordering. With regard to surface taxonomy, errors are evaluated in terms of whether they omit necessary items or add unnecessary ones or they may miss-form or miss-order items. Dulay and Burt (1982) assert that the ultimate division or classification of errors is into types based on linguistic categories. These linguistic category taxonomies classify errors in respect to the language component and the particular linguistic constituents that the error affects. They further add that language components include phonology (pronunciation), syntax and morphology (grammar), semantic and lexical (meaning and vocabulary), and discourse (style) and collocation (incorrect selection between possible word choices). Whereas, constituents include the elements comprising each language component, such as within the syntax whereby one may ask whether the error is the main subordinate clause; within the clause or which constituents are affected, e.g. noun phrase, adjective phrase or choice and so forth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research study because it tries to explain the phenomenon being investigated, without special treatment for the sources of the data and the data is analyzed inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The researcher did not search out data or evidence to prove or disprove any hypotheses, but she tried to understand and interpret the data that she collected to describe the realities found in the field, and to make conclusions and explanations about the problems of this research.

Meanwhile, to get the data, she gave a test and analyzed the papers written by the students. The test assessed the writing elements of the students. The results they produced in the writing test were analyzed for their unity, coherence and word usage. Interview was also done with the lecturer to further understand the students' writing errors.

The Subjects

The population for this study were 21 students who were taking a Writing I course in the English Department of Tarbiyah Faculty of UIN Ar-Raniry, Banda Aceh. This study was done to try to find information about the writing ability that these students had especially in relation to unity, coherence, and word usage. Whether or not these three items were used appropriately in their paragraph writing and what kinds of errors were most often made from these three variables. Their lecturer was also interviewed to gain more information on the students' writing errors.

Research Instruments

A test was utilized as an instrument to collect the data needed for this research. This instrument was used to find out the ability of the students to produce writing that had unity, coherence and good word usage or collocation. The test was given to the students to produce a written composition spontaneously in class. They were asked to write an autobiography and to describe their own physical appearance. The instructions given for the test also asked them to underline their topic sentence and to circle controlling ideas.

Futhermore, the test also asked students to pay attention to their writing in line with introduction, body and, conclusion since the subject was paragraph writing. Since this study was seeking to find out whether unity, coherence, and word usage were used appropriately by the

students in their paragraphs, and the kind of errors made by them in unity, coherence and word usage in constructing their paragraph, so the test that was distributed to them was also designed to generate their ideas by using unity, coherence and word usage together in their paragraph writing.

Besides distributing the test to the students, the researcher also interviewed the lecturer who taught this Writing I course to get more information about the students on their writing ability.

Technique of Data Collection

The test given required the students to write a minimum of 250 words on the topic given in 60 minutes. They were to generate their ideas by themselves in the classroom. Additionally, the lecturer was interviewed for about half an hour. Questions regarding the students' causes of errors, based on her opinions and experiences in teaching, were asked. The interview was recorded with a tape recorder.

Techniques of Data Analysis

The technique used in analyzing the data was qualitative. Thus, all data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. This method was employed to describe the data obtained coherently in narrative form.

After all the essays had been collected after the writing test, the researcher then analyzed them appropriately. In analyzing the data for this research, the researcher tried to count the numbers of errors made in each variable and then tried to code and describe them. In detail, the techniques of data analysis used are as follows:

1. Coding categories, the errors were identified by coding into their respective classifications.
2. Describing the errors, in this case, the researcher described in terms of their types, with reference to the principle uses of each of the types investigated via: unity, coherence, and word usage.
3. These errors were also categorized into their sources,

The result of the interview was transcribed and was analyzed by the following procedures: data reduction, data presentation, verification, and drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESEACH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research results show that some students made errors in each category of unity, coherence and word usage. Some students did not

use unity, coherence, and word usages appropriately in their paragraphs. The most common errors made in their paragraphs were in word usage.

Based on the data, 137 errors were in word usage. These errors included the use of the singular instead of the plural, inappropriate prepositions and articles or incorrect use of 's as a possessive. There were also errors in the use of inappropriate words i.e. collocation errors, incorrect use based on the function of a word in a sentence, and improper words. In some cases, it was found that students had put the *-ing* form of the verb after the modal or they had put in inappropriate capital letters and/or they had written incomplete words. Next, there were 30 errors of unity; some students did not write any sentences that further explained the main idea in the topic sentence. Others conveyed ideas that were irrelevant and/or inappropriate to the controlling idea. Furthermore, some students had problems writing sentences in support of the topic sentence. Some students stated ideas which were not related to the topic sentence. Furthermore, some of them also wrote concluding sentences that were not based on the topic sentences.

There were 9 errors of coherence; these errors happened due to the inconsistent use of pronouns and/or transition signals. It was found that some students did not make sure to use pronouns that were consistent, such as using a singular pronoun where it should have been a plural pronoun. For instance: *I like my teeth, because *it seems abreast on a line** should possibly have been written *because they are in line*. Besides, some of the students did not use transition signals, such as: *similarly, and, in addition, on the other hand, but, etc.* In fact, every paragraph needed some connections, like transition signals to organize the supporting sentences logically.

Moreover, the errors made by the students also can be discussed from the point of view of the source of errors. Interferences from the students' own language was not the only reason for committing errors. Based on the forms of language transfer, the first one is interlingual transfer. From the type of errors that the students made in this study, the writer could tell that they were affected by their first language (Bahasa Indonesia) which has no specific verb form for actions that have happened in the past. For example from the writing of the students, almost all of them failed to change verbs from the present form to the past form. For example one student wrote "*A strong wife bear a beautiful baby*". In fact, there was also misspelling of the adjective. Further, one student put the wrong verb form after using the

auxiliary “can”; she wrote “*we can playing with fashion*”. This error was simply affected by the grammar of Bahasa Indonesia which has no specific auxiliary in sentences like this one in English.

The next cause of errors was intralingual transfer. Intralingual errors are not related to first language transfer, but contributed by the target language itself. The following illustrate examples of this type of error found in writing done by the students: “*I have beautiful foot with not very long finger*”. This error can happen when a student learns a rule or pattern in the target language and then assumes that that rule operates without exception. Thus the use of the singular noun instead of the plural noun is an example of simplification or over generalization. Consequently, the word *foot* was used instead of *feet* and the word *finger* was not pluralized by adding ‘s’ to become *fingers* also there appears to be an error of continuity: after feet we would expect ‘toes’ to be mentioned not ‘fingers’.

Moreover, some students made errors on the use of incomplete rule application. For example, one student wrote “*it was I’am Rani who has habitual hobby and talent like you are and people others who have some dream and biography experience to share with other and I love it*”. This student made many errors in this sentence. In the sentence “*it was I’am Rani*”, she made two errors in the case of writing “*it was*” which adds nothing to the overall meaning of the sentence and then there is the quotation mark after the subject “*I*”, i.e. “*I’am*” which is not needed, and the student also demonstrates ignorance of how to use the tense. In the words “*habitual hobby*” there was redundancy because the word “*hobby*” also expresses an activity that is done repeatedly so the word “*habitual*” is unnecessary. Moreover, the following phrase also has a redundancy “*...are*” after “*like you*”. Besides the sentence “*people others*” was also in error as the student seemed to want to use “*other*” as an adjective to qualify “*people*” in which case she should have written “*other people*”. Therefore, the student should revise her writing. In the opinion of the researcher, the sentence above should be written as follows; “*I am Rani who has a hobby and talent like you and other people have and I love that hobby. I also have some dreams and experience to share with others*”.

Intralingual errors result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than the language transfer. They may be caused by the influence of one target language item upon another. For example, learners may attempt to use two tense markers at the same time in one sentence since they have not yet mastered the language. For example;

'it was I 'am Rani'. In short, intralingual errors occur as a result of attempts by learners to build up concepts and hypotheses about the target language from their limited experience with it. Learners may commit errors due to this reason in many ways.

Based on the interview with the lecturer, she revealed that some students made errors because they lacked enthusiasm and motivation and they rarely did their writing exercises because they were reluctant to do them. They only did writing exercises because they had to take English as part of their college syllabus. They also seldom did any extra reading so that when they had to write they had very little background context to support their writing. Moreover, the sense of their writing was not built up based on their insight of how to use appropriate words in their sentences. It happened because they had very limited vocabulary. In other words, some errors occurred because the students did not pay much attention to the subject of their writing. Some of them apparently thought that writing was just an obligatory part of their study, so that when they were asked to write they used inappropriate words in their writing. Therefore, their writing did not make sense and did not follow the context of the topic.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the errors made by the students were influenced by the use of their mother tongue, interlingual transfer and intralingual transfers. Their lecturer also mentioned the lack of motivation in studying and others were caused by the difficulties of not yet mastering the rules for structure of English.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

This study investigated errors made in writing by students especially in the errors of unity, coherence, and word usage. The most errors made by the students—were in word usage. A number of 137 errors (79%) from the total number of errors made by the students were errors regarding word usage. Many students made errors in spelling and omitted words and letters. By contrast there were only 30 (17%) errors of unity and 9 (5%) errors of coherence from the total of 176 errors counted.

It was evident that writing errors were not only a result of interference from the first language to the learning of the second or foreign language, but also were due to inadequate acquisition of the target language. Because of that, it could be concluded that many of the

students made errors because of interlingual and intralingual transfers. In short, the lecturer believed that most errors were made because the students lacked of motivation and did not do enough writing practice in English.

Suggestions

To help improve the quality of learning of students and to support the success of the teaching-learning process, the researcher has some suggestions, especially for educators. They should try to find the source of errors in writing done by their students, so that they can provide appropriate remedies which will help to resolve the problems faced by their learners. They should also demonstrate to their students the relevant rules. Thus, knowing the source of errors is an important clue for the teacher to decide on the kind of remedial treatment needed. Most often more practice at writing will help a lot

Educational administrators and the government as the provider for the national institutions should add more programs such as training and/or workshops regarding writing to improve English proficiency and to provide useful information for educators at every level of education.

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