

Lecturers' language problems in writing english papers for international publications

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian lecturers are now encouraged to publish papers in international journals so that they can better disseminate research findings and innovations globally. However, many of them have the problems with English language mastery. This study was aimed at identifying and analyzing language problems of the Indonesian university lecturers in writing English academic papers for international publications. The subjects of the study were 66 randomly selected lecturers of various disciplines other than English Education and English Literature. The data were collected by questionnaire and English writing tasks on phrases, sentences, and paragraphs which were then analyzed descriptively. The results show that language errors and mistakes in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, spelling and word forms were all found in the subjects' writings. In writing academic papers for international publications, university lecturers faced language problems as constructing phrases and sentences, choosing and using appropriate vocabulary and terms relevant to their topic of study as well as translating their Indonesian sentences into English.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian lecturers are now encouraged to be able to write and publish academic and research papers in international journals so that they can disseminate their research findings and innovations globally and be involved in intellectual discourses with lecturers and researchers from other different countries. These global networks, together with strong academic reputation, will collectively increase the nation competitiveness. In a knowledge-based economy, the number of quality research, international publications and citations will positively correlate to the country's performance [1, 2]. In addition, it will increase the global trust on the quality of the national products which later will be able to increase the comparative advantages of the country [3] and its foreign exchanges [4]. For the university itself, the number of international publications and citations serves as an indicator of the university's scientific activities [5] and reputation [6].

Under this perspective, the government through the Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education (MRTHE) has required lecturers in general, more especially professors and associate professors to publish their research papers in either accredited or international journals, more over in reputable international journals on periodical basis [7]. For lecturers proposing functional grade promotion of associate professors and professors, having some international publications is now mandatory. The government, through the Ministry is very committed to increase the quantity and improve the quality of publications

especially written by lecturers and researchers by providing them with research grants of various schemes [8], technical assistance [9], and even financial rewards for those successfully publishing papers in reputable international journals [10]. This commitment is very important and therefore, lecturers and researchers should positively respond to it by improving their ability in writing research papers.

Until the end of 2017, the record of Indonesian International scientific publication was still low [4, 11, 12]. The data of Scimago Journal & Country Ranks 2017 [13] listed Indonesia the 8th in Asiatic Region after China, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore. Indonesia had 19,098 documents, 18,683 citable documents, 0.21 citation per document, and H-index 196, while Malaysia as the most productive country in ASEAN region in the same year produced 31,043 documents, in which 29,606 are citable, 0.36 citations per document and H-index 249. The gap of productivity between these two countries was still wide. These data suggest that there be many things the Indonesian lecturers and researchers, together with the government, need to do to be able to compete to its neighboring countries. As the biggest country in ASEAN with the biggest number of universities [14–16] with more than 27,500 lecturers [17], Indonesia should have been the leading country in creating records of international scientific publications.

Some factors are often blamed as the major causes of low productivity of Indonesian lecturers in writing and publishing scientific papers for international publication. Among others are work load, budget availability, and English language mastery [18, 19]. To overcome the language barrier, there have been efforts by universities and the government such as language trainings, writing clinics, and the likes for lecturers but currently the problem lingers. English language mastery still becomes the barrier of Indonesian lecturers and researchers in writing and publishing papers in international journals [12]. Lecturers' competence in English is generally low [20]. A study of non-English lecturers' reading competence in Central Java also suggests that lecturers, especially the non-English lecturers, have poor English reading because of negative attitude and low motivation towards English reading [21]. The day-to-day language of most Indonesian lecturers inside and outside classrooms is *Bahasa Indonesia*. It is the national language which also serves as the language of instruction. Most lecturers and students speak and write in *Bahasa Indonesia*. For the purpose of international publication, some lecturers may genuinely write the manuscripts themselves in English but some others may go to translators for help.

Until the recent days, while a lot effort have been done to improve Indonesian lecturers' ability in writing academic papers for international publications, there have been only a few studies on the ability and problems the university lecturers are facing. A study by Arsyad and Purwa, at al. [19] identified factors hindering Indonesian lecturers in writing and publishing papers for reputable international journals, their attitude towards writing and publishing, and necessary steps to help them improve their ability. The study involved lecturers of Linguistics, Applied Linguistics and Language Education as the respondents. Another study by Arsyad [22] on rhetorical styles of Indonesian authors in writing introduction section of research journals did not address the issue of language problems. Other studies as the one by Azizah and Budiman [23] though addressed the problems and challenges in writing papers for international journals, the respondents of the study were graduate students, not lecturers. Considering the above mentioned facts, the study was important as it could fill a research niche on topic of lecturers' language problem in writing papers for international publication, and may serve as an initiating study for further research and discussions. More specifically, the study was aimed at answering the question of what language problems the lecturers were facing when writing English academic papers prepared for international publications.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This was a descriptive study involving sixty-six non-English lecturers who were working in a private university in Semarang Central Java. They were randomly selected from different study programs/departments and faculties as medicine, engineering, law, business, education, psychology, nursing, education as well as Islamic studies. Majority of them hold Master Degree (80.30%), while the rest 19.70% had Ph.D. degree. Forty respondents (60.61%) were female, 26 respondents (39.39%) were male. Forty eight point forty eight percent of them had been serving as lecturers for more than 8 years, while the rest had been working for less than 8 years. Concerning their experience in international publication, 28.79 percent of them claimed to have ever published papers internationally, while the rest have never done.

Two types of data were collected. The first data were the identification of the perceived problems of non-English lecturers in writing for papers for international publication. This type of data was collected by using questionnaire consisting of 8 statements requesting a dichotomous response of "Yes" or "No" which was written in Bahasa Indonesia. This type of subjective dichotomous questions/statements [24] was chosen under practical consideration namely easy processing and screening ability. The second type of data was the writing samples elicited from the lecturers through tasks. For the purpose of the study, the researchers took only around 25% of the total respondents (16 persons). They were randomly selected from the total

respondents and were given a task to write in English 8 Indonesian phrases and 7 Indonesian sentences (see appendix). They did the task during a session of writing training conducted by the researchers. The second task was paragraph writing. The lecturers were asked to write some paragraphs on a topic they were interested in or thinking of writing, and submitted them to the researchers within a week. However, until the end of the week, only 10 lecturers submitted the tasks; some were sent by email and others were sent in printed forms. These 3 data were to identify possible language problems the lecturers had in writing English.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Results

The first set of data was about the respondents' perceived language problems of writing scientific papers for international publications which were collected by the questionnaire. They are presented in columns of Number (No.) to represent the sequence of the statement, the Statement itself, and the respondents' responses of "Yes" or "No" in the forms of percentage (n = 66) as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. The lecturers' perceived language problems

No.	Statement	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	When I want to write a scientific article in English for international publication, I often do not know what I need to write.	34.85	65.15
2	I can choose and use appropriate English vocabulary for my topic of writing.	46.97	53.03
3	I very often encounter problems of putting my ideas in intelligible English sentences.	60.61	39.39
4	I can organize my own sentences into good paragraphs.	42.42	57.58
5	I very often do not know specific English terms relevant to the topic I am writing.	48.48	51.52
6	I know the important parts of a scientific paper of an international journal.	81.82	18.18
7	I can paraphrase quotations or information from journals with my own English language.	65.15	34.85
8	I very often confront problems in translating my Indonesian phrases and sentences into English.	63.64	36.36

Statement 1 was meant to measure the possible problem of topic mastery. More than 65% of the lecturers didn't find that topic was a problem. Statements of 2 to 5 were meant to investigate the language problems; statements 2 and 5 were about vocabulary problems, statement 3 was about syntax, and statement 4 was about paragraph writing. Syntax, that is how words are structured and arranged in such a way to make meanings [25], became the most common problem faced by the lecturers (60.61%). Statements 2 and 5 show relatively the same (46.97% and 48.48%), and paragraph writing shows the lowest percentage (42.42%). Statements 6, 7, and 8 were meant to consecutively assess the respondents' familiarity with parts of scientific papers of international journals in general, and the problem of making paraphrases and translations.

The second set of data was the language problems in the forms of errors or mistakes found in the lecturers' writing tasks. There were 128 phrases, 108 sentences (4 sentences were excluded because of their unintelligibility), and 42 paragraphs. By applying error analysis suggested by Ellis [26], the errors were identified and presented in Table 2. Data 1 were taken from the phrases, Data 2 were from the sentences, and Data 3 were from the paragraphs which were all written by the lecturers.

Table 2. Errors and mistakes found in the elicited data

No	Type of Problems	Data 1	Data 2	Data 3	Total
1	Grammar				
	1. Word Class	9	3	1	13
	2. Subject-verb agreement	0	16	33	49
	3. Tense	0	4	4	8
	4. Singular/plural nouns	30	5	25	60
	5. Articles	4	15	7	26
2	Syntax				
	1. Phrase structure	16	27	10	53
	2. Sentence structure	0	0	19	19
3	Vocabulary	3	19	1	23
4	Spelling	15	16	14	45
5	Word forms	16	8	18	42

In general as the table shows, in the area of grammar, errors in singular-plural nouns were the most frequently made errors. In most cases, the respondents failed to comply the English grammar rule of plural nouns which are formed by adding "s/es" to their singular forms. They wrote "*some finding, 50 research participant, some previous study, some category, 5 province, many time*, etc.. This could be the effect of their

habit in their first language as Bahasa Indonesia does not have inflection for plural. The second most frequently made errors in the area of grammar is subject-verb agreement. There were 49 cases of inappropriate subject-verb agreement. They mostly happened when the respondents wrote sentences having singular subject in simple present, or when the subject was plural but the verb was written in inflection “s”. Here are some of them: 1) *This paper describe about the influence of breastfeeding*; 2) *The company need to think about*; 3) *These three basic nature of internet becomes very popular to us*; 4) *Economic values means at the moment of*

The third most commonly made errors were the use of articles of “a/an” or “the”. Many articles were found missing in the sentences as in the following excerpts 1) *Eventhough woman can be __ president, ...*; 2) *Community of practice clinical instructorer has __ significant effect ..*; 3) *Some of previous research has found __ significant relation between ...*; 4) *The paper explain about __ influence of breastfeeding ...*, etc.. There were also problems in word class as “ *Research instrument was validation by the expert; Nowadays, cooperation spreadly fast; Recently, the consument access information very easy by internet*”. To be correct, the word “*validation*” should have been “*validate*”, “*spreadly*” should have been “*spread*”, and “*easy*” should have been “*easily*”. For tenses, there were a few problems of incorrect tenses for present and past as in “ *... which consist of 36 nursing student who practice in Sultan Agung Islamic Hospital; Today, cooperatives were developing very fast*” which should have been respectively “*... which consist of 36 nursing students who practiced in Sultan Agung Islamic Hospital*” and “*Today, cooperatives are developing very fast*”.

For syntax, respondents had problem in constructing English phrases. There were 53 inappropriate constructions of phrases. The problems varied but mostly were about noun phrases and verb phrases formations. Respondents had the problems of sequencing the head and its modifiers. For example, when they were requested to write in English “*beberapa temuan penelitian terdahulu*”, many of them wrote “*some finding previous research*” or “*some finding research previous*”. Similarly, they wrote “*participant research*” for “*partisipan penelitian*” instead of “*research participant*”. Other examples are “*the problem research that interest*” for “*interesting research problem*”, and “*repeat topic discussion*” for “*repeatedly discussed topic*”. For verb phrases, many problems were about the construction of modal + verb, auxiliary + verb, be + participles, and the like. Here are some excerpts of them 1) *This finding research will implication of development*; 2) *The result of this research will be implicate to the*; 3) *Role model will increased awareness ...*; 4) *Some of previous research have find significantly relation ...* While for sentence writing, the missing of the verb (predicate) as one of the basic elements of a sentence was common, as found in the excerpts 1) *In studying the materials, teaching materials, in an easy way using their devices connected to the internet*; 2) *This important to gets funding through various research schemes, reseach grants, and others research scheme both domestic and international funding*; 3) *So very excited to make essay about children as a victim*; 4) *From internet or mass media such as television or newspaper not a little news about children as a victim*; 5) *Data analysis using descriptive analysis and multiple regression analysis*; etc.

For vocabulary, some lecturers had problems in using the right word among the similar words as found in the excerpt of “*affect of breastfeeding*” for “*the effect of breastfeeding*”, “*studies model*” for “*learning model*”, “*cooperation*” for “*cooperatives*”, and “*consument*” for “*consumer*”. Problems of spelling were found in the 3 types of data. They were among others 1) the missing of double letters as in “*discus*” for “*discuss*”, “*acces*” and “*acess*” for “*access*”, “*employe*” for “*employee*”, and 2) the missing of unvoiced letters as in “*government*” for “*government*”, “*reseach*” for “*research*”, “*instrumen*” for “*instrument*”, “*brestfeeding*” for “*breastfeeding*”, “*decreas*” for “*decrease*”, “*elemen*” for “*element*”, etc. For word forms, the errors were mostly because of the use of inappropriate forms of verbs as present participle or gerund, infinitive, past participle and the like as in the following excerpts 1) *celebrate Idul Fitri is special moment so ...*; 2) *... there are two factors to considered*; 3) *... collect with use some of category*; 4) *At least Mudik Lebaran blending culture, economic, etc.*

3.2. Discussion

The quality of an academic or research paper is evaluated based on, mostly, three criteria namely the quality of the topic, the language, and the format of the paper as prescribed by the journal’s editors, therefore, lecturers who are willing to publish in journals must be able to satisfy those requirements. This study found that for majority of the lecturers, topic was not a problem. When they wanted to write they had already got certain topics to be developed. It is good because In the case of academic writing especially for beginners, topics very frequently become problems. The studies by Rahmiati [27] and Asauka and Usui [28] found that topic generation was among the major problems beginner writers were facing in the beginning stages of their writing process resulted from their insufficient knowledge and experiences. For lecturers, topic may not be a problem because they have been working in academic institutions where reading papers and journals, discussing, teaching or even writing topics of their disciplines can be regular activities. However, this study

found that majority of the lecturers had problems with the language as proven by the analysis of the language tasks collected and their responses on the questionnaire. This finding supports previous studies which suggest that language is one of the major problems hampering Indonesian lecturers from writing in English [12]. The elicited data of this study show that there were problems with all of the language aspects being observed from grammar, syntax, vocabulary, spelling, and word forms. Good content written in poor language will not likely be able to attract readers, and consequently will be rejected by editors. Therefore, the lecturers must also learn how to write correctly and accurately.

The first language aspect deserves attention for lecturers trying to write academic papers in English is the vocabulary. Although, the number of lecturers who could not choose and use appropriate English vocabulary was only slightly higher than the ones who could, the problem of vocabulary is serious as vocabulary is the basic communication tool. Without vocabulary, writing activity will stop even though the writers have a lot of interesting ideas in their minds. Someone who is trying to write English scientific journal will not be able to do so if his/her acquisition of English vocabulary in general and the specific terms related to the topic is poor. Poor vocabulary mastery can be the result of poor language input the language learner acquires [29]. Therefore, in the effort of learning to write scientific journals, it is very recommended that the lecturers read a lot of English journals. The finding that vocabulary was a problem for many of the lecturers in writing academic papers of this study was similar to the study of Abdulkareem [30] which investigated academic writing problems faced by postgraduate students at University Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) with respondents coming from 8 different countries in Arab world as Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Arab Algeria etc.. The study revealed that vocabulary was the most-mentioned problem they were facing when writing academic papers in English. Similar to this was the study of Asaoka & Usui in Japan [28] which found that vocabulary and expression, together with grammar and mechanics were the surface-level problems in writing for academic purpose. Though the elicited data of the study show that errors in vocabulary were not many, they did show that there was a problem of vocabulary accuracy. As found in the excerpts, the use of *affect* instead of *effect* or *studies* instead of *learning* potentially leads to misunderstanding.

The second aspect language problem dealt with syntactic issue, namely how words and phrases are constructed to make them meaningful [25]. In any language, words are not just put in sequences randomly but they must be arranged in such a way to make them intelligible and successfully convey meanings. The elicited data show that there were many inaccuracies in syntax in both phrase and sentence levels of writing and were confirmed by the data of the questionnaire in which more than 60% of the lecturers admitted to have the problems with syntax. This finding is in line with the study of Yusuf and Jumriana with respondents of students writing their theses which found that as the beginner writers, the students made a lot of errors and mistakes in the construction of phrases and sentences [31] and also the study of Azizah & Budiman on challenges in writing academic papers [23] which found similar result that grammar, in this case includes syntax, was a problem in writing for international publication.

The third aspect of language which may become problem for non-English lecturers was paragraph writing and paragraph development. A paragraph is a group of related sentences about a certain topic which is developed by the writer [32]. Mostly paragraph consists of a topic sentence, supporting details, and, in some, conclusion. The sentences in paragraph should be organized cohesively so that ideas are tightly connected. The data show that the number of lecturers who had the problem of paragraph was higher than the one who did not. Parallel to writing problems of many other English language learners, problems in writing paragraphs could be paragraph structuring (the relationship between topic sentence and supporting details), topic development, the failure to use cohesive device appropriately and so on. This finding was also in line with the finding of Azizah & Budiman in which more than 50% of their respondents found difficulties in organizing ideas or opinions in paragraphs.

The fourth language problem which was highlighted in the research was the mastery of English specific terms relevant to the topic written. A term is a verbal expression of a concept belonging to the conceptual system of a language for specific purpose. The writer's experience of teaching and providing consultation in writing for scientific journals or papers by non-English lecturers confirms that terminology is a problem. Since the translation of English terms into *Bahasa Indonesia* may use different phrases or words [33], when an Indonesian writer want to write those Indonesian terms into their original English, they may have wrong terms. Fachruddin et al. give example of the term "superheated steam" which may be translated into Bahasa Indonesia as "*uap panas lanjut*", "*uap kering*", or "*uap superpanas*". These terms then could be translated by Indonesian writers as superheated steam, dry steam, or superhot steam. These may trigger confusion among readers. It is understandable, therefore, when more than 60% of the lecturers admitted that they had problems in translating Indonesian phrases into their English counterparts.

Except the language problems, the study also attempted to analyze respondents' understanding on the parts of a journal paper with statement "I know the important parts of a scientific paper." The responses

were 81.82% of the respondents had “Yes” while the rest, 18.18%, had “No”. This strongly suggests that respondents had been very familiar with elements of a journal paper as well as its organization or structural pattern. Following Swales [34], the major structural patterns of research articles is Introduction, Method, Result, and Discussion (IMRD). However, Lin and Evans’ study with 433 empirical research articles published in 2007 found that, besides IMRD, frequently used pattern in the corpus being studied are ILM[RD]C and IM[RD]C [35]. ILM[RD] stands for Introduction, Literature Review, Method, Result and Discussion, and Conclusion, while IM[RD]C stands for Introduction, Method, Result and Discussion, and Conclusion

When respondents were requested to response on their ability to paraphrase quotations or information from journals with their own English language, interestingly 65.15% respondents chose “Yes”, and only 34.85% declined. This suggests that lecturers at university had the skills and ability to paraphrase. Paraphrasing is a technique of incorporating sources by borrowing the author’s ideas but they are restated in the writer’s own language. The study by Hayuningrum on students’ problems of writing paraphrases for academic writing found forgetting to documents, including too much of the original, misreading the original, leaving important information, adding opinion, expanding or narrowing the meaning, and substituting inappropriate synonyms as common problems in paraphrasing [36]. Though those research findings were of students, they may serve as warnings for lecturers in writing phrases.

4. CONCLUSION

Indonesian lecturers are now improving themselves to be able to publish scientific papers in international journals. However, many of them are facing language problems. Data elicited from the lecturers show that errors and mistakes occurred in all aspects of language which were observed namely grammar (word class, subject-verb agreement, tense, singular-plural forms, and articles), syntax (phrase and sentence structure), vocabulary, spelling as well as word forms. Singular/plural nouns and subject-verb agreements were the two most frequently made errors, while for syntax, the number of errors in phrases was higher than the one in sentences. In their writings, lecturers also made errors in vocabulary, spellings, and word forms. More than 50% of the lecturers found that vocabulary, syntax, paragraph writing, and translating Indonesian into English were problems for them, while parts of journal articles, topic to write, specific terms related to topic being written, and paraphrasing were perceived as problems by less than 50% of the respondents. Some language problems can be the results of the grammar differences between the lecturers’ native language Bahasa Indonesia and English as singular and plural nouns, subject-verb agreement, the construction of phrases, but others may be the result of inaccuracies of their writing.

It is recommended, therefore, that in the effort to increase the number of lecturers’ international publications and improve the quality of them, lecturers should improve their English language mastery. Writing trainings or writing clinics directed to help them improve their ability in writing papers for international publication must also sufficiently address the issue of language problems. They should not only address contents, technicalities and procedures since the issues of writing, particularly writing in a foreign/second language, are not only about what to write but also about how to write.

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