HEAR THEM OUT: CONSTRAINTS ENCOUNTERED BY IELTS STUDENTS IN THE WRITING CLASS

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menginvestigasi masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh para siswa *IELTS* di kelas menulis dan bagaimana guru menyikapi masalah-masalah tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka kualitatif *narrative inquiry* karena peneliti memiliki peran sebagai pengajar di kelas yang diteliti. Partisipan adalah tiga orang murid SMA yang mengambil kelas persiapan *IELTS* di salah satu lembaga kursus Bahasa Inggris di Bandung. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara, observasi, analisis jurnal mengajar dan tulisan-tulisan para murid. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterbatasan kosakata, kesulitan dalam mengembangkan ide, keterbatasan ilmu mengenai tata cara penulisan esai ilmiah, kebosanan, rasa lelah, rasa cemas, dan hambatan bahasa adalah masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh para murid *IELTS* di kelas menulis. Lebih jauh lagi, strategi *drilling* dan pemberian umpan balik (*feedback*) kepada para siswa dianggap sebagai cara yang paling efektif untuk meningkatkan kemampuan menulis siswa.

Kata kunci: *International English Language Testing System* (IELTS), kelas menulis, Bahasa Inggris untuk penutur asing/*English as a Foreign Language* (EFL)

ABSTRACT

The purpose in this study is to investigate the problems faced by the students in the IELTS writing class and how the teacher addressed the existing problems. It employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design since the researcher took the role as the teacher in the preparation class. The participants were three senior high school students who enrolled in an IELTS preparation class at one of the private English language learning centres in Bandung. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants, classroom observations including my teaching journal, and the students' writing. The study revealed that limited vocabulary, difficulties in constructing ideas, insufficient mechanical writing aspects, boredom, exhaustion, anxiety, and language barrier were the challenges encountered by the participants. Moreover, among a number of teaching strategies that I conducted to address the problems, drilling IELTS writing strategies and giving personal feedback to the participants were considered to be the most effective since they gained positive responses from the participants in which they managed to demonstrate improvement on their IELTS writing skills.

Keywords: International English Language Testing System (IELTS), writing skill, challenges, English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Introduction

The number of Indonesian students who leave their home country to pursue higher education overseas has been increasing exponentially. The recent data of the global flow of tertiary-level students from UNESCO exhibits immense figures - approximately 42,000 Indonesian were enrolled in higher education overseas such as in the UK, US, Australia, Malaysia, Egypt and Japan (ICEF Monitor, 2017).

The trend demands certain requirements that have to be fulfilled by the applicants; one of which is they have to take an International English Language Testing System (henceforth IELTS) academic test in order to be able to apply for higher education overseas. An IELTS certificate is required to prove that the applicants possess adequate language proficiency, thus, they are eligible to enrol in a particular institution overseas.

For Indonesians whose first language is not English, taking an IELTS test can be problematic due to limited knowledge of the target language proficiency. More specifically, writing has been perceived as the most challenging part of the IELTS test. Many applicants have to retake the test because they failed to achieve the required band for writing skill. The recent survey in 2015demonstrated that Indonesia's mean overall and individual band score achieved by academic IELTS test takers were quite low; 6.6 for listening and reading, 6.2 for speaking, 5.8 for writing, and the overall was 6.4.

To address the phenomenon, some of the private English language learning centres offer an IELTS preparation course including the language. Students' demand of achieving a certain band score in order to apply for a scholarship or enrol in an institution overseas has drawn particular issues such as students' problems in acquiring IELTS knowledge especially writing. IELTS writing stage has always been discerned as the most difficult section. Nevertheless, only limited studies addressing the aforementioned problem.

This study aimed at revealing constraints encountered by three Indonesian senior high school students in the writing class of IELTS preparation program they enrolled in. The study also aimed at how the teacher had helped the students address the constraints so that they could develop their IELTS writing skills. Therefore, it endeavours to embrace the problematic matter in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What constraints have the IELTS students at one of the private English

language learning centres in Bandung encountered during writing sessions?

2. How has the teacher responded to the constraints?

It is expected that the result of this research can be beneficial for IELTS teachers in addressing students' difficulties that might emerge in the writing sessions.

Method

1. The participants

Before working at the private English language learning centre in which the students took the IELTS preparation program, I joined a similar program at one of the official IELTS institutions for nine days. After having intensive learning of IELTS, I took the test for the first time. The overall band that I achieved was rather satisfying – for speaking, reading and listening I achieved band 7 while for writing I got 6.5. Having adequate knowledge and experience of how IELTS test is conducted, I have been assigned to teach IELTS preparation classes at the private English language learning centre that I am working at now. I have been teaching the IELTS preparation classes for almost two years. The students were mostly fresh graduates or college students who wanted to pursue higher education overseas – I only had

one senior high school student during that time.

The IELTS preparation class that I recently had consisted of four senior high school students. They are currently in the last grade of senior high school and want to continue their study overseas. This class was quite challenging to deal with since the students did not possess adequate language proficiency to be in the IELTS class. Along the way, one of the students decided to quit the program because she will enrol in local university that does not require an IELTS certificate. Therefore, only three students that were involved in this study.

I gave the students pseudonyms 'Eugenia', 'Angela', and 'Valentine'. Before joining the IELTS preparation class, all of the students had never taken the real IELTS test. Additionally, Eugenia had enrolled in a General English class for approximately four months. She was placed in a class called Front Runner (FR) level 10 in accordance with the result of the placement test that she took including online and oral tests. The online test covered listening, reading, and grammar. Following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) that is applied in the English language learning centre where she studied, Eugenia was at B2.1 level as an independent language learner or upper-intermediate learner. Angela also joined a

General English class and was placed in Front Runner (FR) 5. She was at B1.1 level in accordance with CEFR framework that is an independent language learner. Valentine had not been in any English class but the result of placement test showed that she is at intermediate level.

Based on the justification on the selection of participants for the study, they were categorised as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' information

Name	Age	English Language Proficiency
Eugenia	17	Upper-intermediate
Angela	17	Intermediate
Valentine	17	Intermediate

2. Data collection

In-depth interviews with the students, followed by observations that I conducted in the classroom during the writing sessions and their writing were employed to collect the data, and personal teaching journal written during the sessions contributed to the data collection. I jotted down the problems which were frequently shared by the students regarding IELTS academic writing.

3. Data analysis

This study was developed under qualitative framework precisely a narrative analysis. It is in accordance with the aims of this study that focused on the participants' experiences regarding obstacles they faced during IELTS writing sessions and personal experience in addressing the obstacles. As echoed by a number of scholars that narrative inquiries deal with experiences that are shaped and narrated through one's perspective from various sources both spoken and written (Clandinin 2007, 2016; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Daiute, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Wells, 2011). Moreover, Merriam (2009) highlights that the cornerstone of narrative inquiry approach is first-person involvement in shaping a story based on his/her experience. Another characteristic of narrative inquiry as pointed out by Creswell (2007) is a small-scale investigation which involves limited individuals as participants. Also, Webster and Mertova (2007) pose the suitability of conducting a qualitative research within narrative inquiry paradigm since it addresses the complexity of certain problems involving cultural and human centeredness in the research.

To analyse the data, Creswell's (2014) framework of qualitative data analysis was taken into account. The analysis covered some steps including collecting raw data, organising and preparing data for analysis, reading through all the data, coding the data in order to obtain themes of the issue, interrelating themes

and description, and interpreting the meaning of themes.

4. Limitations

Since this study involved me as the researcher and the teacher of the participants, bias might be present due to power relation between me and the students when conducting interviews in order to obtain the data. Nevertheless, I have attempted to curtail the occurrence of the bias by establishing a more intimate bond with the participants such as conducting sharing sessions before the class commenced and spending some time outside the classroom. The participants were personally more open and relaxed in voicing out their opinion.

Another issue was that the participants were not very critical in elaborating their answers during the interview. That might be because of their age and the fact that they had never been interviewed before. In order to get more comprehensive data from the students during the interview, I provided seemingly leading questions, however, the questions were not leading at all since they were constructed based on the observations in the classroom.

Results and Disscusion

1. Constraints encountered by the students in IELTS writing class

1) Limited vocabulary

All the participants mentioned that one of their biggest problems during IELTS writing sessions was limited vocabulary. They elaborated that dealing with IELTS Academic tasks both Task 1 and Task 2 was difficult since they had to write the required minimum words for each task within an hour, however, they did not possess a wide range of vocabulary to build up their ideas in the writing.

Their vocabulary deficiency might be caused by some factors. First, they admitted that they rarely read despite the fact that reading up-to-date information is beneficial to support their content knowledge especially IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. Generally speaking, reading has not been fancied yet by the majority of Indonesian – not to mention the students. The latest report by The Jakarta Post (2016) highlighted a quite shocking point that a study by Central Connecticut State University located in the US placed Indonesia in the 60th out of 61 nations regarding reading interest. Some studies also revealed low reading interest of students in which they only read because they have to not because they want to (Iftanti, 2012; Nazhari et al., 2016).

Next, they did not get adequate exposure to academic vocabulary – typical words used in IELTS Academic Writing. The participants speak English fluently in the classroom. They understand English classroom instructions and

are able to digest information well. Nevertheless, composing an academic essay has been very challenging for them. According to Cheung (2016), constructing effective writing requires writing competence in order to fulfil a specific purpose of the writing. In IELTS Academic Writing, the writing competence covers task achievement, coherent and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy. The participants were not accustomed to the writing competence. Although Eugenia and Angela had an experience of enrolling in a General English class, they did not acquire academic writing knowledge. Therefore, the only academic writing exposure they could get was from IELTS Writing class that was not significantly sufficient to improve their IELTS Academic writing skills.

Last, the participants did not practice writing at home. Based on the observations, they only wrote at the class and were reluctant to complete writing tasks that I assigned for homework. They claimed they were too busy with school homework. Thus, the exposure to the vocabulary was very limited.

Insufficiency vocabulary also resulted in their ability to paraphrase. Paraphrase is defined as an action to address the originality of author's ideas by employing different vocabulary and sentence constructions (Cheung, 2016). The participants had a problem with paraphrasing the question both in IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 and Task 2. They tended to employ identical words from the questions to be put in their writing.

Moreover, Angela argued that when she wanted to produce a good essay, she knew that she should vary her word choices by using synonyms so that she did not repeat particular words. However, she always ended up using the same over and over because she could not write the synonyms due to her lack of vocabulary.

2) Constructing ideas

The participants highlighted that sometimes they understood the question but they could not develop their ideas constructively into their writing. This issue is intertwined with the previous problem. Generating ideas to compose a piece of academic writing is rather arduous when the vocabulary is limited.

This issue mostly occurred when the participants had to construct IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 in which they had to produce an essay within approximately 40 minutes with at least 250 words responding to a general issue.

Generating ideas into writing involves critical thinking. Unfortunately, critical

thinking is not human being's thinking default for it is culturally constructed. As it is comprehensively elaborated:

This thing we call "critical thinking" or "analysis" has strong cultural components. It is more than just a set of writing and thinking techniques – it is a voice, a stance, a relationship with texts and family members, friends, teachers, the media, even the history of one's country. This is why "critical analysis" s so hard for faculty members to talk about; because it is learned intuitively it is easy to recognize, like a face or a personality, but it is not so easily defined and is not at all simple to explain to someone who has been brought up differently. (Fox, 1994, p. 125 as cited in Atkinson, 1997).

The participants were brought up in Indonesian context in which critical thinking is not culturally glorified. They are not accustomed to the concept of critical thinking because their surroundings have failed to provide them with necessary knowledge of the concept. This situation has reflected on their academic writing performance.

3) Insufficient knowledge of mechanical aspects of writing

In order to produce a good piece of IELTS Academic writing, test takers should be able to write coherently and bring in the cohesiveness within their writing. Coherent and cohesive writing can be achieved if mechanical aspects of writing are present and well-constructed. The mechanical aspects of writing include spelling, punctuation, citation of references (if applicable), neatness and appearance (Brown, 2001). In IELTS Academic Writing, one of the criteria for coherence and cohesion aspects is paragraphing. The participants found it hard to organise their writing into well-structured and coherent paragraphs especially in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. This unfortunate circumstance might derive from their deficiency of writing habit.

In the case of spelling, the common mistakes that the participants made in their writing were triggered by first language interference. For instance, Angela repeatedly misspelled the word 'stable'. She wrote 'stabil' instead. Her first language interference might cause the misspelling since 'stable' is written 'stabil' in Indonesian that is her first language. Below are the examples of misspelling appeared in Angela's writing:

In 2018 the number is about 1300, and in 2009 it increased to 1500, the number is stabil…
For the car theft in 2003 the number of car theft is about 2800, and it's stabil…
From 2007 to 2009 it's stabil too.

4) Boredom and exhaustion

Another intriguing point that the participants mentioned was bringing more games into the classroom to rejuvenate their brains. In a personal interview on October 23, 2017, Eugenia mentioned her expectation for

IELTS writing class. She said, "I expect more games to refresh our mind because every session we have to writing, speaking, and then reading. We don't have time to refresh our mind."

It is understandable if the participants expect more games in the classroom since I rarely provided the students with fun activities during IELTS writing sessions because I wanted them to focus on improving their writing skills. One or two fun activities that I ever conducted were spelling race and unscrambling words related to IELTS vocabulary.

Additionally, the students felt exhausted after school. The exhaustion sometimes demotivated them to study IELTS. Thus, all they wanted was to have fun by playing games which I could not cater because I had to focus on delivering IELTS learning materials.

5) Language barrier

All participants agreed that sometimes they found the explanations delivered in English were hard to understand. However, they did not think that it was a big deal. It is perhaps because of their English background in which two of them joined a General English class at the same centre. Thus, they have got used to the use of English as classroom instructions. Although Valentine had not joined any class before enrolling in the IELTS

class, she could keep up and understand the English classroom instructions and explanations. They did not expect me to shift the classroom language into Indonesian. They expected me to mix both English and Indonesian. They wanted me to employ Indonesian when explaining technical terms appearing in IELTS writing questions. Unfortunately, I could not grant their wishes for the policy that I have to adhere to that English comes first and teachers are not allowed to use first language in the classroom.

6) Anxiety

Interestingly, one of the participants, Angela, highlighted her anxiety during IELTS writing sessions. She did not actually elaborate her reasons why she felt anxious since she kept saying 'I don't know'. However, what I can tell from the observations is her anxiety occurred when she did not understand the question and her insufficient vocabulary made it difficult for her to write. She said during a personal interview on October 23, 2017, "I don't know just nervous like if I nervous I blank."

Language anxiety is commonly experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Anxiety is defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Elaine et al.,

1986, p. 128 as cited in Gkonou, 2017). It happens when students attempt to utilise a foreign language which they have not yet skilfully acquired.

Among the other students Angela was the most motivated learner proven by her attendance and the observation towards her attitude in the classroom. She had the least absences. She always endeavoured to complete her IELTS writing assignments although sometimes her writing was rather dismal. She had set her expectation to be skilful in IELTS Academic Writing. However, due to limited time and exposure, she encountered hard time when she could not achieve what she had expected, that was when her language anxiety took place.

7) Other problems

The participants described that they were disappointed because they could not get extra sessions for the sessions that they missed when they were on holidays. They could not get the extra sessions because of the policy of the language centre. The policy states that a class cannot be postponed unless there is an urgent matter, thus, students who miss a session in the classroom lose their academic hours and they are not eligible to get extra sessions. The participants claimed that missing the writing sessions hinder their writing progress. According to the student attendance, the

students missed five to seven sessions in total out of 12 IELTS writing sessions.

Another unfortunate situation that occurred during the sessions was students' lateness. Based on the lesson record and personal journal, the students always came late to the class. The lateness ranged from 40 to 60 minutes. They claimed the traffic as the cause. Since they came late to the class, the academic hours were wasted. The learning was not effective. I could not deliver the learning materials effectively. They missed a lot of important information.

2. How I addressed the problems

Deriving from the experience, I found that writing section in IELTS is the most challenging. Therefore, I have certain strategies for the IELTS students in the writing class. I could feel what they have been through since I was on their shoes once.

At the very first stage when I met them for the first time which was reading, I figured out that they were not ready to be in an IELTS class. In spite of the intricacies, I have endeavoured to address the students' problems in the writing class and improve their skills. The following are the strategies implemented in the class.

1) Explaining the Dos and Don'ts of IELTS Academic Writing and writing rubric in the first meeting

In the first meeting of IELTS writing class, I highlighted some points that the students need to remember when they deal with IELTS Academic Writing test such as types of writing, minimum word limit they have to write, time allotment for each task, and the typical questions. I also gave them the IELTS writing rubric for Task 1 and Task 2 for then I explained the criteria including task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy. I wanted the students to comprehend the essence of IELTS Academic Writing.

It is essential to let the students know the purpose of why they have to write (Cheung, 2016). Comprehending the purpose of writing is a part of writing process. By allowing the students to recognise the purposes of writing, they may realise the importance of the writing.

2) Drilling the learning materials and writing techniques

I employed a number of learning materials for IELTS writing. The main source was the IELTS book. The other materials I obtained online. The learning materials covered describing a chart, table or graph, comparing/contrasting graphs and tables, describing diagrams, describing maps, and how to express ideas clearly.

I also taught the students how to write properly in terms of mechanical aspects such as paragraphing and punctuation since they really struggled in the beginning. I usually explained first and let them practice by writing only an introductory statement of writing Task 1, I would check and then they would revise the mistakes.

3) Providing the students with common words used in IELTS Academic Writing

Based on the observation, the main problem of the students is limited vocabulary. Therefore, I have come up with a strategy that is giving them the list of common words used in IELTS writing including the synonyms especially for writing Task 1. For instance, the word 'show' that frequently appears in an introductory statement of Task 1. I gave them a list of synonyms of the word namely 'depict', 'exhibit', 'demonstrate', 'portray', thus, they could avoid repetition in their writing. It worked rather effectively despite some grammatical mistakes they made. The following is an introductory statement of one of the latest IELTS writing Tasks 1 that Angela produced:

The graph and table depict the average monthly temperatures and the average number of hours of sunshine per year in three capital cities.

4) Familiarising the students with writing styles for typical IELTS writing questions

For example, in IELTS writing Task 1, the students might need to describe a map. In order to describe the changes in the map, I taught them to employ passive voice which is commonly used to explain the development in certain areas. Below is a part of Eugenia's latest IELTS Academic Writing Task 1

In 2010, the bridge remains the same. The road was divided into five branches and surrounded by houses along the road. The primary school was enlarged. The gardens were replaced by retirement home. The post office remains unchanged.

In writing Task 2, I always emphasized the importance of coherent and cohesive devices such as 'first', 'next', 'last', 'moreover', and 'furthermore', thus, the students were able to link up their ideas in the writing more coherently.

I also provided them with some IELTS Academic writing produced by experts so that they could recognise the organisation, sentence constructions and writing style. Hyland (2009) describes this technique as guided writing in which students can imitate the model texts.

5) Promoting brainstorming through mind-mapping

"Miss, I don't know what to write!" "Miss, I don't understand the questions!" Those are the common utterances that I heard in in the class. As I elaborated earlier that one of the students' constraints is generating ideas. Thus, I brought up the concept of brainstorming to the class. Brown (2001) states that there are some ways to unlock hidden ideas such as brainstorming, free writing, and looping. In the class, I specifically employed mind-mapping techniques to assist the students in unravelling their minds.

6) Conducting peer-checking

The idea of sharing with friends and getting feedback not only from me as the teacher has caught my attention. Therefore, I used peer-checking technique in the class hoping the students would gain some benefits from the concept. Unfortunately, it did not work effectively because of the fact that their low language proficiency so that they could not clearly point out their peers' writing issues.

7) Giving feedback on writing tasks

One of the teachers' roles is being a feedback provider (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 2007; Richards, 2015). I always checked the students' writing and gave written feedback following the IELTS Academic Writing rubric. After writing the feedback, I conducted a personal feedback session with the students in

which I let them read the written feedback first and clarified unclear information they might still be puzzled with. During the personal feedback sessions I would review the lessons that they may have forgotten. The feedback sessions worked effectively because of the small number of students, thus, I could focus on each of them thoroughly in terms of their writing progress.

All the students argued that personal feedback was rather helpful in improving their writing performance. They knew what mistakes they made. They knew what they had to improve. After getting the feedback, they rarely made the same mistakes although other new mistakes usually emerged.

3. Problems I experienced teaching IELTS Academic Writing

1) Dealing with other constraints

Students' lateness and a number of sessions they missed were the hardest constraints for me as the teacher. They always came late to the class in spite of all the warning and reminder that I addressed to them. Moreover, there were a number of sessions they missed due to a school trip and other unexpected matters. The students only had six to seven IELTS Academic Writing sessions out of twelve in total. That number did not adequately cater their needs in order to improve their IELTS writing skills.

2) Communicating concepts and learning materials

Due to their language proficiency and lack of exposure to academic writing, I found it hard to broaden the learning materials. I could not go more deeply into the process of writing for I only touched the surface as long as they could complete two academic essays during the real test they are going to take later.

Conclussion

This study attempts to reveal constraints encountered by IELTS students in the writing class. Some issues have emerged during the writing sessions. The students voiced out the challenges they encountered including limited vocabulary, difficulties in constructing ideas, insufficient mechanical writing aspects, boredom, exhaustion, anxiety, and language barrier. I have endeavoured to address the issues by using some techniques in which drilling materials and providing them with personal feedback have been argued to be effectively beneficial. Small number of students might support the success of the techniques.

The increasing number of IELTS test takers in Indonesia is inevitable. Different learning environments of IELTS might have different issues. This study only focused on a section of IELTS that was academic writing

precisely students' problems and how I addressed the problems as the teacher. It is expected for further research to delve into other sections in order to provide more information regarding teaching IELTS in Indonesian context.

For further studies action research can be conducted based on the positive responses from the participants regarding drilling technique in writing class and personal feedback session from the teacher.

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