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The Difficulties Faced by Students in Producing Free-Writing: A Study at STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena

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Abstract

Writing is a means of communication to convey meaning as well as a medium for self-expression and self-assessment and also for teacher-assessment. In the tertiary context, writing even has more complex meanings because of its social context and epistemological issues of knowledge. This study was conducted to identify errors and mistakes made in free-writing by students at STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena and to investigate the reasons they faced numerous difficulties in producing good free-writing, to investigate the students' opinions towards the activity of writing in general, and also the comments of their lecturers on their assignments. 18 free-writing assignments were collected from 18 students and a questionnaire was also distributed to strengthen the data obtained from the writings. The written assignments were then analyzed by using the form feedback framework, in terms of conventional grammatical errors, adapted from Ashwell (2000). The findings showed six categories of grammar that were often misused in the students' free-writing, namely agreement/verb-tense, spelling, articles/determiners/plurals, lexical choice, pronoun and preposition/collocation. The results from the questionnaires revealed that the main obstacles faced by the students in producing free-writing were their lack of ideas/difficulties in organizing ideas as well as their problems with grammar.

Keywords: Free-writing, form feedback, grammatical errors, writing implication.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

It has been identified that students experience some difficulties in improving their writing ability, particularly at the tertiary level. Some students are unsuccessful in this

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subject as writing is considered a complex skill, especially writing in English (Waters & Waters, 1995, p. 90). Richards and Renandya (2006, p. 493) say that the difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into a readable text. To become accustomed to writing, therefore, students should arrange more time to practice writing. Free-writing is one type of writing that can be used to improve skills in writing.

Cho (2003, p. 166) asserts that good writers make use of multiple revisions in order to improve their text whereas poor writers strive to get it right at the first attempt. It is clear that teachers' feedback certainly plays an important role in motivating students to write better. From the comments made the students learned how to fix their writing to avoid making the same mistakes again. This is pertinent to what Lea and Street (1998, p. 162) point out that students knew that variations of form existed, but admitted that their real writing difficulties lay in trying to gauge the deeper levels of variation in writing and how to set about using them.

It is, moreover, expected that teacher's commentaries on students' writing should be one of the best contributions to assist their writing to be better. This is because the comments of their teachers on the students' writing provide supplemental written information to guide the expectations of their writing. This study, consequently, is an attempt to identify common mistakes made by the students in their free-writing, to identify the reasons for their difficulties in producing an error free text, and to investigate the students' opinions towards the activity of writing in general and also towards their lecturers' comments on their free writing assignments.

1.2 Research Questions

A number of research questions have been developed for this study. They are as follows:

1. What kinds of errors/mistakes are found in students' free-writing in English at STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena?
2. Why do the students face numerous difficulties in producing quality free-writing?
3. What are the students' opinions towards writing as an activity in general and what are their lecturers' comments on the quality of their free-writing assignments?

1.3 Research Objectives

Based on the questions above, this study aims:

1. To identify the errors/mistakes made by students in English free-writing exercises at STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena.
2. To investigate the reasons for their difficulties in producing quality free-writing in English.
3. To investigate the students' opinions towards the activity of writing in general and their lecturers' comments on the quality of their English free-writing assignments.

1.4 The Choice of Participant

A number of 18 students in their 3rd year of study at STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena were the participants for this study. Free-writing assignments from these students were the samples taken as they met particular criteria for the purpose of this

research. The researcher of this study is a lecturer at this institute and, therefore, is familiar with the context of this study; thus the researcher has easy access to obtain the data needed as well as the convenience aspect for doing the research. Dörnyei (2003, p. 72) calls this procedure the *convenience* or *opportunity sample* which means that “an important criterion of sample selection is the convenience for the researcher”. It is hoped that this study will have some beneficial impacts for the students and also for the institution as well.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Difficulties in the World of Writing

As writing involves more than just producing words and sentences, the students’ written language communication skills are critical in clearly expressing their knowledge and understanding Brown (2010, p. 277). Paying attention to linguistics is pivotal to generating quality writing which represents the success of language learning procedures. Harmer (2004, p. 31) also emphasizes that writing encourages students to focus on accurate language use and provokes the development of language as the writers endeavour to resolve the problems which the writing puts into their minds.

The difficulties of writing usually emerged starting from the first words that are written. Difficulties are made worse during the choosing and generating of ideas followed by organizing ideas and selecting words/vocabularies to start writing. The problems do not stop at this point, as they continue when the student has to write in the context of a certain discipline, for instance, politics, economy, education and many others. This is because the understanding of written language can be different amongst different disciplines; therefore the writer should be careful in the use of his/her language. Furthermore, writing becomes more difficult when it is written as a second or foreign language, like Indonesian students writing in English. Schleppegrell (2004) notes that it is not surprising that some second language writers, even as third and fourth year university students still have difficulty with the technical and scientific writing required in their field of study.

Apart from the problems above, cultural values also play an important role in writing since they influence the way of writing itself. It is undeniable that the cultural issues cannot be separated from the writing aspects. Shields (2010, p. 6) points out that to be successful, the academic culture including behaviour, value and attitudes should be adapted to the writing. Even though it is little emphasized, the aim is that the students should convey their ideas clearly in their writing in order to produce a communicable and readable text. Brown (2010, p. 183) further indicates that this approach requires certain organisational patterns in order to create a typical written structure, characteristic of the language itself.

2.2 Free Writing

According to Oshima and Hogue (2007, p. 35), free-writing is a pre writing technique in which you write without stopping for a specific amount of time. This means that the students are free to express any ideas in writing. They are allowed to write freely without limitations to genre, context and topics. As one of various pre-

writing techniques, in addition, free-writing may be used as a medium to familiarize students with writing itself, since the students practice writing freely at those times. In fact, the more students write, the more fluent they will become as writers.

Constructing quality writing requires certain processes to be accomplished. These processes are necessary in order to meet the needs of the writing concept. Oshima and Hogue (2007, p. 15) state that the processes of writing have roughly four steps, which are to create ideas, organize the ideas, write a rough draft and polish the draft. On the other hand, Segal and Pavlik (1996) divide the steps of writing into seven steps; namely exploring ideas, organizing ideas, developing cohesion and style, writing the first draft, practice editing, editing writing, and writing the second draft.

2.3 The Lecturer's Comment/Feedback

Ways of grading students' writing differ amongst lecturers, based on the purposes of the tasks assigned. The comment/feedback from lecturers is one of the techniques used to improve the students' work. The comments provided are an essential element in order to improve the quality of the writing produced. Dealing with this, Huot (2002, p. 165) says that assessment is needed to assist students to learn to work as writers and to picture writing assessments as a necessary, theoretical, authentic and practical technique to be taught to students in order to improve their writing activities. Thus, assessments given should be useful for the students to improve their writing.

In terms of its purpose, the lecturer's comment/feedback should be a beneficial aspect for both the teachers/lecturers and students. The assessment is also used to measure the success of the teaching process. Through the assessment, it can be detected whether the teaching learning process has been completed successfully. Mickan (2003a) states that the assessment procedure involves interpretative practices resulting in variations in candidates' responses to the same prompts and in scoring variations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Scope of Study

This research focused on identifying errors in students' free-writing, investigating the reasons for any difficulties in generating free-writing, and their opinions towards writing as an activity in general and comments of their lecturers on the students' free-writing. The sample population for this study was 18 students in their 3rd year of study (fifth semester) in the English Language Department at STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena Banda Aceh. The researcher collected a sample of writing from each student which had been marked by their lecturers as data for this study. These writings were then graded using certain formulae.

3.1.2 The Theoretical Framework

The framework used in this research was adapted from Ashwell (2000). He categorizes the lecturer's feedback based on errors found in the students' writing,

namely feedback, related to grammatical errors, spelling, verb tenses, and many others. The percentage of comments provided based on each category is then calculated. This is to identify the possible mistakes that may occur in the students' writings overall and also to rate which category of grammatical conventions that are most often wrong. This study thus followed Ashwell's procedures for analysis.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Research Instrument 1: The Students' Writing

The researcher collected students' free writing assignments with the lecturers' comments on them. These documents were in both soft and hard copies. The mistakes made were recognized to find out the category of errors that appeared most frequently. Each free-writing assignment from each student contained at least 150 words.

3.2.2 Research Instrument 2: Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to obtain data about the reasons for the students' difficulties in producing error free free-writing based on their experience, as well as their opinions towards writing activities in general and their lecturers' comments on their free writing. The questionnaire was divided into two sections; firstly, the difficulties experienced by students in producing free writing, and their opinions towards writing activities in general and lastly their lecturers' comments on their free writing. Ears (2004, p. 244) explains that a questionnaire is a document containing questions and other types of items designed to solicit information appropriate for analysis. Hence, this study provided 10 closed-ended questions to be answered by the students by circling one of the options available. Each question has 4 (four) options, one of which must be chosen for the answer.

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 The Students' Writing

In analyzing the students' writing, the researcher used an adaptation of Ashwell's study as mentioned above in section 3.1.2. The study focuses on data from the forms, an example of which can be seen in Table 1 that follows below:

Table 1. Main types of errors found (adapted from Ashwell, 2000, p. 233).

<i>Type of error</i>	<i>Examples (possible corrections)</i>	<i>Estimated proportions (%)</i>
Lexical choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am a waitress in a <u>tavern</u> [→ bar?] - <u>From</u> I was a child I thought my family's different [→ since?] - ... They do <u>home service</u>. [→ they help around the house?] 	19
Articles /determiners /plurals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ... He worked at __ law office in Kobe [→ a?] - ... but he changed <u>the</u> work [→ his] - "what <u>a</u> beautiful plants!" [→ delete a or s] 	18

Table 1 continued...

Spelling/typos	- Grasses [→ glasses] - Stubboun [→ stubborn]	13
Prepositions	- ... was born <u>at</u> Yokohama [→ in] - ... his place of work <u>__</u> the Metropolitan Government Office [→ in/at]	10
Punctuation /sentence and clause boundaries	- ... and they come back home at late. So, they have a little time to spend with their family. [→... late, so...?] - But he and I have a little time to spend together. Because I go out every day. [→... together, because...]	8
Agreement	- They never threat <u>his wife</u> as ... [→... their wives...?] - He care_ for us very much [→ cares]	6
Verb/tense	- I <u>was introduced</u> his office <u>by him</u> [→ he showed me around his office?] (compounded errors) - He comes home after family <u>eat</u> dinner [→ has eaten]	5

For this study, checking the students' writing and categorizing them into the type of errors based on their lecturer's comments, the researcher revised some of the categories above to suit the context of this study. Accordingly, agreement and verb-tense preposition and collocation as well as pronoun were the additional categories for this study.

3.3.2 Questionnaire

After analysing the data from the questionnaires, the percentage frequency of each type of error was then calculated using the formula given by Anas (2008, p. 43):

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

Where:

- P = percentage of each type of error
- F = frequency/number of each type of error
- N = the total number of errors
- 100% = constant value for percentages

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 The Analysis of Students' Writing

This section presents the findings in relation to the mistakes found in the students' writing. 18 free-writing assignments, each from a different student, were analyzed. The results are as follow.

Student 1 (S1) free-writing

Various errors were found in S1's free-writing under the title *Life in boarding school*. Overall, a total of 15 were found in the agreement/verb-tense, spelling and article/determiners/plurals categories. Most of the errors were in the agreement/verb-tense category with a total of 10 (66.7%) errors. They were followed by spelling and article/determiners/plurals categories with a total of 3 (20%) and 2 (13.3%) errors respectively

Student 2 (S2) free-writing

The title of S2's free-writing was *Shopping*. 22 errors were identified in the areas of spelling, article/determiners/plurals, preposition/collocation, agreement/verb-tense and lexical choice. The least number of errors was in the lexical choice category, in which only 1 (4.6%) error was found. Errors in misuse of preposition/collocation and agreement/verb-tense categories occurred 3 times (13.5%) and twice (9%) respectively, whilst in the article/determiners/plurals category there were 4 (18%) errors. Spelling had the most errors, 12 (54.5%) errors in all. The spelling category of errors seemed to be the main difficulty experienced by S2.

Student 3 (S3) free-writing

S3 experienced difficulties in only 2 categories of errors in her free-writing under the title *My favourite country*. The mistakes appeared in the areas of spelling and of agreement/verb-tense categories with a total of 2 (50%) errors in each of the 2 categories. Overall, the content of S3's free-writing was quite good and well-organized since only a few mistakes were identified.

Student 4 (S4) free-writing

Under the title, *My mother*, 14 errors were identified in S4's free-writing with a total of 9 (64.3%) errors, agreement/verb-tense errors were the most frequent. Following this, spelling errors were the second highest with 3 (21.4%) errors. Article/determiners/plurals and lexical choice categories had the least number of errors with 1 (7.1%) error in each category.

Student 5 (S5) free-writing

Curriculum 2013 was the title of S5's free-writing and 13 errors in the various grammatical conventions were noted. These mistakes were in the areas of agreement/verb-tense, article/determiners/plurals, spelling, lexical choice and preposition/collocation. The last 3 categories had the least number of errors in the writing, only 1 (7.7%) error each. With a total of 2 (15.3%) errors, article/determiners/plurals category was the second most common error found in the writing. In fact, S5 also faced the most difficulty in applying agreement/verb-tense in writing similar to S1's and S3's cases, in which most errors occurred with a total of 8 (61%).

Student 6 (S6) free-writing

Reading S6's free-writing with the title *Seminar*, 13 errors were found. These mistakes were found in 5 different categories; they were agreement/verb-tense, spelling, lexical choice, article/determiners/plurals and preposition/collocation. Similar to other students, most mistakes were in the agreement/verb-tense, with 7 (53.9%) errors. This was

followed by spelling and lexical choice errors with a total of 2 (15.3%) errors in each. The least errors appeared in spelling and lexical choice, with only 1 (7.8%) error in each.

Student 7 (S7) free-writing

Agreement/verb-tense and spelling were the 2 types of errors found in S7's free-writing, under the title, *The function of literature*. 7 (87.5%) errors were found in the agreement/verb-tense category, which was followed by the spelling category with only 1 (12.5%) error.

Student 8 (S8) free-writing

S8 had very few errors in his writing titled, *Walking alone*. Only 2 (66.7%) errors in the preposition/collocation category and only 1 (33.3%) error was found in the agreement/verb-tense category.

Student 9 (S9) free-writing

There were 6 errors in 2 categories found in S9's free-writing: spelling and article/determiners/plurals category errors, with 3 (50%) errors in each category. The title of the free-writing was *How to be a good Muslim*.

Student 10 (S10) free-writing

15 errors in 4 categories [e.g. article/determiners/plurals, agreement/verb-tense, lexical choice and spelling categories] were found in S10's free-writing with the title *Dream*. The most errors were in the area of article/determiners/plurals, with a total of 5 (33.1%) errors. The category of agreement/verb-tense and lexical choice had a total of 4 (26.6%) errors each. Spelling was the least with only 2 (13.3%) errors.

Student 11 (S11) free-writing

Errors in categories of agreement/verb-tense, lexical choice, spelling, article/determiners/plurals and preposition/collocation were detected in S11's free-writing under the title *Global warming*. 4 (50%) errors were noted in the area of agreement/verb-tense. This was the highest category of mistakes in this writing. Only 1 (12.5%) error occurred in each of the other 4 categories listed above.

Student 12 (S12) free-writing

S12 had 16 errors in lexical choice, agreement/verb-tense, pronoun and article/determiners/plurals in her writing, under the title *Apple and orange are alike*. Lexical choice had the highest number of errors detected with a total of 6 (35.2%) errors. Article/determiners/plurals category had only 1 (5.9%) error. Agreement/verb-tense and pronoun categories had 5 (29.4%) and 4 (23.5%) errors respectively.

Student 13 (S13) free-writing

22 errors in 3 categories: agreement/verb-tense, articles/determiners/plurals and spelling, were found in S13's free-writing under the title *Teaching method*. 15 (68.2%) errors were found in the agreement/verb-tense category. Articles/determiners/plurals category had 5 (27.7%) errors. Spelling was the category with the least errors with a total of only 2 (9.1%) errors.

Student 14 (S14) free-writing

Articles/determiners/plurals was the category with the most errors found in S14's free writing, entitled *Teaching verb*, with a total of 5 (41.8%) errors. Agreement/verb-tense and preposition/collocation categories had 3 (25%) and 2 (16.6%) errors respectively. Spelling and lexical choice had the least errors with only 1 (8.3%) error in each category making a total of 12 errors overall.

Student 15 (S15) free-writing

S15 writing under the title *Refreshing* had a total of 11 errors in applying agreement/verb-tense, spelling, articles/determiners/plurals, preposition/collocation and lexical choice. 4 (36.3%) errors were found in the area of agreement/verb-tense. The misuse of articles/determiners/plurals and spelling errors totalled 3 (27.3%) and 2 (18.2%) errors respectively. Preposition/collocation and lexical choice categories had the least number of errors with only 1 (9.1%) error in each.

Student 16 (S16) free-writing

S16's free writing entitled *Nature of gold*, had 15 errors in the 5 following categories: agreement/verb-tense, articles/determiners/plurals, spelling, preposition/collocation and lexical choice. Agreement/verb-tense had the highest number of errors with a total of 6 (40%) errors, followed by articles/determiners/plurals category with 4 (26.7%) errors. 2 (13.3%) errors each occurred in the spelling and preposition/collocation categories. The lexical choice category had only 1 (6.7%) error.

Student 17 (S17) free-writing

Under the title - *The betel leaves for health benefits*, S17's free-writing can be categorized as a good one, since only 2 mistakes were found in the writing. 1 (50%) error was in the agreement/verb-tense category and 1 in the spelling category.

Student 18 (S18) free-writing

There were 11 errors in S18's free-writing, entitled *How to make tempe bacem*. Articles/determiners/plurals and spelling categories had the most errors with 5 (45.4%) and 4 (36.4%) errors respectively. Only 1 (9.1%) error was identified from each of the pronoun and the agreement/verb-tense categories.

The number of errors from the most to the least in each category in each sample above is set-out in the table that follows:

Table 2. Number of errors in each category in each sample.

Student No.	Number of errors in each category						Total errors
	Agreement/verb tense	Spelling	Articles/determiners/plurals	Lexical choice	Preposition/collocation	Pronoun	
1	10	3	2	-	-	-	15
2	2	12	4	1	3	-	22
3	2	2	-	-	-	-	4
4	9	3	1	1	-	-	14
5	8	1	2	1	1	-	13
6	7	2	1	2	1	-	13
7	7	1	-	-	-	-	8

Table 2 continued...

8	1	-	-	-	2	-	3
9	-	3	3	-	-	-	6
10	4	2	5	4	-	-	15
11	4	1	1	1	1	-	8
12	5	-	1	6	-	4	16
13	15	2	5	-	-	-	22
14	3	1	-	1	2	-	7
15	4	2	3	1	1	-	11
16	6	2	4	1	2	-	15
17	1	1	-	-	-	-	2
18	1	4	5	-	-	1	11
Total (%)	89 (43.4%)	42 (20.5%)	37 (18%)	19 (9.2%)	13 (6.3%)	5 (2.4%)	205

Based on Table 2, it can be seen that the area in which the students as a whole made most errors were in *agreement/verb tense* (43.4%), followed by *spelling* (20.5%) and *article/determiners/plurals* (18%). Few errors were found in *lexical choice* (9.2%), *preposition/collocation* (6.3%) and the least in *pronoun* (2.4%).

4.2 Analysis of the Questionnaires

4.2.1 Difficulties Faced by Students in Producing Free-Writing

The results from the questionnaires showed that there were various reasons for the students to face difficulties in generating error free free-writing. They mostly perceived difficulties in the area of lack of ideas/organizing ideas. In this section, Tables 3 and 4 show their views towards free-writing activities:

Table 3. The main problems faced in producing free-writing.

No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
6	a. Lack of ideas/difficulties in organizing ideas	8	44.5%
	b. Inadequate vocabulary	2	11.1%
	c. Lack of exercises	2	11.1%
	d. Grammatical problems	6	33.3%
	Total	18	100%

Most students experienced some difficulties in writing due to their lack of ideas/difficulties in organizing ideas (44.5%). Grammatical problems were also an important issue faced by these students in producing error free free-writing since one third of them chose this option. The rest of them faced difficulties in the area of insufficient vocabulary and lack of exercises. It is assumed that the latter was very much related to their unfamiliarity with writing.

Table 4. Mistakes in grammatical conventions in free-writing assignments.

No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
7	a. Verb-tense/agreement	9	50%
	b. Word choice	0	0
	c. Spelling, Preposition/collocation	5	27.7%
	d. Articles/plurals/determiner	4	23.3%
	Total	18	100%

Similar to the finding in the previous analysis, most errors in the students writing appeared in the area of verb-tense/agreement. Based on Table 4, it can be seen that half (50%) of the students made this kind of mistake. The table also shows that students made mistakes in the areas of spelling, preposition/collocation and articles/plurals/determiner, at 27.7% and 23.3% respectively. None of the students felt lexical choice/word choice was a difficulty.

4.2.2. Students' Opinions towards Writing Activities in General and Lecturers' Comments on Their Free-Writing Results

Tables 5 present the results from the questionnaire on these issues.

Table 5. The students' opinion about writing as a subject.

No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
1	a. Very pleased	9	50%
	b. Pleased	7	38.9%
	c. Not really pleased	2	11.1%
	d. Not pleased	0	0
	Total	18	100%

Table 5 shows that half of the class (50%) were very pleased with writing as a subject and 7 (38.9%) of them were pleased. On the other hand, only 2 (11.1%) students were *not really pleased*. This result indicates that most students enjoyed learning writing, whilst none of the students chose the option: *not pleased*.

Table 6. The students' writing activity outside of the class.

No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
2	a. Often	7	38.9%
	b. Sometimes	10	55.5%
	c. Seldom	1	5.6%
	d. Never	0	0
	Total	18	100%

Based on Table 6, it can be clearly seen that the option *sometimes* was the option most often chosen by the students. More than half of the class (55.5%) chose this option. 7 students confidently selected the first option (*often*) indicating that writing was also prioritized outside of the class. Whilst only 1 student chose seldom for practising writing outside of the class and none chose never.

Table 7. The students' opinion whether writing is one of the difficult subjects

No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
3	a. Strongly agree	0	0
	b. Agree	12	66.6%
	c. Disagree	5	27.8%
	d. Strongly disagree	1	5.6%
	Total	18	100%

According to Table 7, more than half of the students believed that writing was one of the difficult subjects because more than half of the students – 12 (66.6%) chose

agree. 5 students chose *disagree* and 1 student found that writing was not one of the difficult subjects by choosing *strongly disagree*.

Table 8. The students' opinion whether free-writing may improve writing skills in general.

No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
4	a. Strongly agree	10	55.5%
	b. Agree	8	44.5%
	c. Disagree	0	0
	d. Strongly disagree	0	0
	Total	18	100%

As can be seen in Table 8, more than 10 (50%) of the students *strongly agree* that free writing may improve writing skills in general whilst the remaining 8 students (44.5%) chose the option *agree*. This shows that the students had a positive response toward the free-writing activity even though in general they faced some difficulties in producing error free free-writing

Table 9. The students' opinion whether free-writing can help to generate ideas.

No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
5	a. Strongly agree	4	22.3%
	b. Agree	12	66.7%
	c. Disagree	0	0
	d. Strongly disagree	0	0
	Total	18	100%

The data from Table 9 shows that more than half of the students agree that free writing can help generate ideas. 4 students even strongly agree to it. Not one of them chose the options disagree and strongly disagree for this statement, but 2 students made no choice. The result indicates that free-writing *can help to generate ideas*

Table 10. The students' opinion whether the lecturer's comment/feedback on writing is very useful for further writing.

No	Options	Frequencies	Percentage
8	a. Strongly agree	13	72.2%
	b. Agree	5	27.8%
	c. Disagree	0	0
	d. Strongly disagree	0	0
	Total	18	100%

Turning to the lecturer's comment/feedback on the students' writing, 72.2% of students strongly agree that those comments are very useful for further writing improvement. Another 5 students chose to *agree* with this statement. None of the students opted for *disagree* or *strongly disagree* options. This showed that the students learn from the comments provided in order to improve their writing.

Table 11. The students' opinion whether lecturer's comments/feedback can significantly decrease the number of errors produced in free-writing.

No	Options	Frequencies	Percentage
9	a. Strongly agree	10	55.5%

Table 11 continued...

	b. Agree	8	44.5%
	c. Disagree	0	0
	d. Strongly disagree	0	0
	Total	18	100%

The data in Table 11 shows that more than 50% of the students believed that their lecturer's comments/feedback can significantly decrease the number of errors produced in their free-writing. 10 students chose the option *strongly agree*, and the rest chose *agree* with this statement. Since no one chose *disagree* or *strongly disagree* options, it can be assumed that the students employed the comments provided to them to try to reduce the number of errors in their writing.

Table 12. The students' opinion whether the lecturer's comment/feedback influences the students' ability in producing further free-writing significantly.

No	Options	Frequencies	Percentage
10	a. Strongly agree	0	0
	b. Agree	18	100%
	c. Disagree	0	0
	d. Strongly disagree	0	0
	Total	18	100%

Surprisingly, all of students (100%) chose to *agree* that the lecturers' comments/feedback influenced their ability in producing further free-writing. It can be concluded that the lecturers' comments were an influential input for the students in order to create more and better writing in the future.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Students' Writing

One of the objectives of this study was to identify the errors/mistakes made by students in their free-writing. The findings showed that a variety of errors occurred in their free-writing and these related to errors in the grammatical conventions, such as agreement/verb-tense, spelling, lexical choice, pronouns and others. These mistakes appeared variously amongst the students' writings representing their ability in applying the rules of grammar in writing itself. It is believed that the more they practice the easier they could produce better writing. This is pertinent to what Oshima and Hogue (2007) state that:

Writing is never a one-step action; it is an ongoing creative act. When you first write something, you have already been thinking about what to say and how to say it. Then after you finished writing, you read over what you have written and make changes and corrections. You write and revise and write and revise again until you are satisfied that your writing expresses exactly what you want to say. (Oshima & Hogue, 2007, p. 15)

This investigation revealed that the *agreement/verb-tense* category (43.4%) had the most errors found in the students' free-writing. Almost all students made mistakes

in this category in their writing. An assumption emerged then that the students did not master this part of grammar well even though this category is very crucial in constructing a sentence to be developed into a paragraph. Spelling was another category where there were often mistakes in their writing. This may be due to being careless whilst the writing also indicated the lack of mastering lexical skills. The students, therefore, should pay more attention to their writing to produce better writing. The following areas of grammatical conventions that had many errors were the spelling (20.5%) and the *articles/determiners/plurals* category (18%). The students need to pay more attention in using articles as they appeared sometimes to be confused whether to use a definite article or an indefinite one when crafting a sentence. The

Turning to *lexical choice* (9.2%) and *preposition/collocation* (6.3%) categories, some students experienced difficulties in these categories in their writings. These kinds of mistakes, especially the *lexical choice* category, influence the meaning of writings that can lead to misunderstandings amongst readers. The students, therefore, should be careful in selecting the words used in their writing to ensure that the words symbolize the meanings meant to be conveyed. In terms of the *preposition/collocation* category, although it seems a simple category, it is essentially very difficult to be mastered and applied correctly in free-writing.

The *misuse of pronouns* (2.4%) was the least category found in the students' free-writing. Henderson and Moran (2010, p. 367), accordingly, highlight that the problem of pronoun-antecedent agreement is especially common among student writers when the antecedent noun is either an indefinite pronoun or a singular noun referring to a person where gender is unspecified. The accuracy of using this point, thus, is necessary in order to recognize who or where to refer to.

By recognizing these categories, it can further help teachers to construct their teaching for writing to be more focused on how students can avoid these types of errors. Therefore, the students can be better prepared in their learning for writing.

5.2 Questionnaire

After analyzing the data, a variety of reasons were found on the students' difficulties in producing free writing as the response to the second research question of this study. The results showed that almost all students experienced difficulties in the area of grammar, in spite of lack of ideas. It indicated their limited ability in mastering the grammatical conventions which led to errors in writing. Fregeau (1999) claims that whether the students learn writing or not may depend on their attitudes towards writing and the requirements they perceive which contributes to their learning. Furthermore, the questionnaire also inquired into the students' opinions towards the lecturers' comments and feedback on their writing, which is related to the third research question. Almost all students agreed that the comments and feedback provided on their writing were very useful to avoid similar mistakes that might happen in their future writing. The students also believed that feedback from their lecturers may decrease the number of errors in their future writing. It is assumed that the students will learn from the comments/feedback provided by their lecturers in order to produce better writing. As has been explained previously, the more practice the students get the more they can produce better quality writing.

6. CONCLUSION

The results from this study showed that knowledge of grammatical conventions was one of the main factors faced by the students in constructing error free free-writing. Some errors in grammar were found in the students' writing, especially in the categories of agreement/verb-tense, spelling, articles/determiners/plurals, pronouns, lexical choice and preposition/collocation. With respect to the number of errors which occurred, errors in the agreement/verb-tense category were the most frequent in their writings. Most students made errors in this category which resulted in poor writing. Incorrect spelling and errors in the use of articles/determiners/plurals were the next ranked categories in terms of errors. The least common mistakes in their writing were in choice of pronouns, lexical choice and preposition/collocation.

Based on the answers to the questionnaire, most students provided the reason for difficulties in writing as *lack of ideas/ difficulties in organizing ideas* as the main obstacle they faced in their writing, instead of inadequate vocabulary and lack of exercises. The students, however, found that free-writing may improve their writing skills in general, such as in producing ideas. In light of the lecturers' comments/feedback on their free-writing, the students gave a positive response since almost all of them agreed that these comments and feedback offer them better solutions to produce better writing in the future. The students also believed that the lecturers' comments and feedback may decrease the number of errors in their future writings

Due to the limitations of this study, in particular the limited number of students' free-writing analyzed and the limited scope (as the study was at only one institution), therefore, it is suggested that future studies should involve a larger number of participants from more institutions to gain a better understanding of the problems faced by the students in writing. The comments and feedback from the lecturers regarding free-writing should also be further analysed, so that the type of comments that can really help students improve their writing can be identified.

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