

Realizing Learners' Writing Problem from the Beginning: A Case Study

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Abstract

The importance of writing has become a primary concern in teaching English as a foreign language. The skill of writing enables learners to generate ideas into certain organisation and awareness once the process of writing is undertaken. From writing, learners are also expected to be able to construct and use the language more accurately because they have enough time to think compared to have an oral activity. However, such an ideal situation can hardly be manifested due to particular problems faced by learners. This present study aims at investigating the struggling points of writing construction done by students. There were fourteen students who were purposefully selected as the subject of this study. In order to gather the supporting data, the researcher employs document study and direct observation. This study is expected to give contribution to help teachers confirming common problems faced by students during learning writing. Nevertheless, it also contributes to other prospective studies which are on the same interest with this present one.

Keywords : Assessing Writing, Writing Problems, Writing Construction

The importance of teaching writing has become a primary concern in teaching English as a foreign language. Emmons (2003) states that writing is a basic skill that needs to be mastered by all language major students. It is considered important since writing allows learners to have more effective social cognitive ability than oral communication (Farooq & Hasan, 2012). Besides, it also enhances the ability to generate ideas into certain organisation and awareness once the process of writing is undertaken (Smyth et al., 2001). From writing, learners are expected to be able to construct and use the language more accurately because they have enough time to think compared to have an oral activity (Harmer, 2004). In addition,

In Indonesian context, the significance of writing is also brought to the curriculum. Across many curriculums which have been implemented, writing

still becomes one of the primary skills to be taught in English learning. Indonesia present curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*) expects students to achieve the standard of competence for writing which is being able to express meaning in written mode of interpersonal and transactional discourses either formally or informally in the forms of genres such as recount, narrative, procedure, descriptive, news item, report, analytical exposition, hortatory exposition, spoof, explanation, discussion, and review in daily lives.

However, teaching writing in English is not such a simple task to do. Hyland (2008) states that in approaching writing tasks, students are actually searching for solutions to a series of problems. In fact, sometimes students cannot detect what their problems are. A number of researchers have identified common problems that students face in

writing. Myles (2002) lists some issues regarding the source of student's problem in writing, such as lack of integrative and instrumental motivation, only few times of practising, lack of vocabulary acquisition, and being not able to organise their writing well. In line with Myles' idea, Adas and Bakir (2013) also note some learners' problems in writing, namely (1) English language learners have limited vocabulary which makes them tend to repeat the same words frequently; (2) they have lack of ability to compose writing; (3) Students are unwilling to share their work with other to have feedback; (4) students identified that the teaching method and situation around them are the main causes of their weaknesses. In conclusion, most of the factors that cause students' problem in writing are cognitive factor which is within them, and social factor which is related to the atmosphere that can influence students' motivation to write.

Some specific issues are also found in other studies regarding the learners' problem in writing. As for instance, the issue on students' accuracy. Nofal (2010) conducts a study in which he investigates the reasons behind the weaknesses of English major students in Philadelphia University. He finds out that it is difficult for students to express their idea adequately in writing. The most discrete characteristics of a good paragraph are virtually absent in the writing of most students. This includes unity, consistency, order, and coherence as well as the use transitional words. In addition, Younes and Albalawi (2015) identified students' specific problems in writing such as (1) grammatical problems in the field of tenses, prepositions, syntactic, subject-verb agreement and the use of articles, (2) punctuation problems at the level of the absence, the misuse or the addition of punctuation marks, (3) spelling problems in the field of substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation and unrecognizable words.

Based on the researcher's preliminary investigation, writing a simple

text in a particular type of genre is taught when learners are in junior secondary level. Indonesia present curriculum specifically demands students in junior high school to be able to write some genre of texts, namely descriptive, narrative, and recount text.

This present study selects recount text as the sample of writing production due to some reasons. Theoretically, writing recount text is a controlled writing where students need to imagine their past events and put it into written form, and recalling their past events is a hard task to do (Goatly, 2000: 30). Students in this phase need to be able to recall their past events in detail while they have to think about how they should write those events with proper language. The second reason is due to the practicality of this research and the demand of the curriculum. Eighth graders will get the material on how to construct a recount text in the second semester when the research is conducted.

Recount text itself has been defined by several experts in teaching writing. Hyland (2003) defines recount text as a construction of past events which is sequenced in a written form. It is ordered into a list and description of the retold events (Anderson & Anderson, 2002). Anderson and Anderson (2002) further state that the purpose of recount text is to either informing or entertaining readers. In conclusion, recount text is one of text types which focuses on retelling and informing reader about past events using detail chronological order.

Recount text is classified into three types. The first type is personal recount. It is one of the recount texts which retells the writer's experience as the main issue in the writing production. The second type is called factual recount. Factual recount is a text which contains list of record of particular events such as news report and history. The third one is called procedural recount. It is a kind of recount text which records events to accomplish a certain activity such as science experiment. From those types, the first type is the most

commonly used since it is considered as the simplest one and the closest type to the students' daily experience.

The products of students writing are commonly assessed by using writing rubric. There are some aspects within the rubric that provides the rater with analytical correction. Therefore, the researcher also intends to use assessment rubric to look at the struggling point stated in the analytical analysis. Generally, students writing ability is determined by their ability to fulfil some criteria. The criteria of a good writing cover grammar usage, mechanical skills, content, organisation, and vocabulary (Heaton, 1990: 135). These criteria are also in line with the criteria stated by Hibbard and Wagner (2013), and O'Malley and Pierce (1996). They consider those criteria as the minimum requirement that needs to be fulfilled in writing.

Taking this case into account, the researcher conducted this present study which aims at investigating, identifying, and confirming the real problems faced by students during the process of learning.

Method

Among many approaches, this study employs a qualitative approach in form of a case study because the small number of students made it impossible to generalize findings, but also made it possible to give more attention to individual students so that each student's development could be observed closely. Further, the time allocation for students to receive an English lesson is the same for everyone.

Participants

In order to select the participant in this study, the researcher worked collaboratively with a second graders teacher in a preliminary investigation. Firstly, teacher administered a writing test in a class. Their writing products were assessed by using an analytical assessment rubric containing some aspects as mentioned previously. From the test, it resulted in 14 students who were not able to pass the minimum criteria stated in the rubric. These fourteen students were then investigated further.

Data Collection Procedure

There are some steps of collecting the data as well as instrument used in this study. The researcher's role is as the main instrument who will interpret the other data gathered. The following process is described as follows. (1) The researcher will narrow the participants of this study based on the result of the writing test administered previously. As it has been mentioned, there were 14 participants selected, (2) the fourteen students were observed as they undergo the lesson. The lesson itself consists of modelling of the text, teacher's explanation, and finally students have to construct their own text. In deep observation during the paragraph construction utilises an observation sheet which rate students from poor to very good. The criteria of observation are provided as follows. (3) Both data gathered from the result of observation and analysis from the rubric will be compared together to seek higher degree of credibility of this study, (4) the researcher presents the data in a description.

Table 1. Observation sheet on Text Production

Aspects	Evidence of Skill			
	Poor	Adequate	Good	Very Good
Being able to produce sentence and paragraph from literal level				
Being able to analyse the theme of the text				

Being able to pick out critical details
Being able to explain what the doer does in the text and its motivation
Being able to sequence the plot and events
Being able to describe setting and background

Aside from having an observation, the researcher also analysed the previous test taken by students. This will reveal which among five aspects become the most struggling points for students.

Table 2. Writing Assessment Rubric

Components of Writing	Weight	Description
Content	4	The content is highly matched with the topic and has no bias
	3	The content is still relevant to the topic and there is a slight part which is not understandable / bias
	2	The content is less relevant to the topic and bias on idea is clearly seen
	1	The content is not relevant to the topic and totally not understandable
Organisation	4	Well organised writing, ideas are clearly stated, using no run-on sentence
	3	Having a few mistakes on the organisation, ideas are understandable, there are some usage of run on sentence
	2	The writing product is not well organised, ideas can somehow be understood, there are some usage of run on sentence
	1	The writing is not well organised, ideas is not understandable, there are frequent usage of run on sentence
Grammar	4	Few grammatical inaccuracies in the writing production
	3	Some grammatical inaccuracies in the writing production
	2	Numerous grammatical inaccuracies in the writing production
	1	Frequent grammatical inaccuracies in the writing production
Mechanics	4	Correct use of punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation
	3	Some occasional errors are found on the use of punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation
	2	Errors in punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation are frequently found
	1	Ignoring the use of capitalisation and punctuation, and frequent errors in spelling.
Vocabulary	4	Purposefully chosen vocabulary, sentence variety, and

	word voice to affect reader
3	Vocabulary less precise and information chosen less purposeful
2	Vocabulary basic and not purposefully selected, tone flat or inconsistent
1	Not controlled diction, sentences are choppy

Result and Discussion

Observing the students while having writing lesson, the researcher comes up with the results as following. It reveals that 64% of the participant found no obstacle to produce sentence and paragraph in a literal level. This means the learners tend to directly write what comes to mind into a sentence and develop it into paragraph. Nevertheless, they still need to learn how to sequence their ideas into more net organisation. It was reflected that 57% participants have poor ability to sequence their paragraph. A good plot can be seen when the events are presented chronologically, yet their ability mostly stuck when describing the background and setting of their text with 78% participant.

It is noted that there is a difference when students receive the lesson and when they have to produce a text. When they receive a lesson, they seem to follow that pretty well. Looking at the observation result during that process, most students are able to identify the model text given to them. There are 85% students who are able to analyse the theme of the text. This means that they are capable of connecting ideas contained in the text and wrench out a theme. It is supported by their scanning ability since they are also good in explaining what the doer does in the text. There are 78 % students capable to do that and 85% from total participants who are able to pick up critical details from the text.

The result of observation is then compared to the analysis of the students' product. In order to gather it, the researcher administered a writing test where the students were required to write a recount text based on several topics given. The topics were, 'my last holiday', 'touching memories', 'unforgettable moment', and 'childhood experience'. These topics were undertaken since it was expected that students can compose a piece of writing about memorable events more easily and larger amount of writing can be produced to be analysed.

Analysing the students' writing products provides the researcher with the most common problems faced by the students since they were analysed by using the same rubric. In this case, the researcher adapted analytical writing scoring rubrics from O'Malley and Pierce (1996: 145), and Hibbard and Wagner (2013). Analytic writing rubric became a choice since it provides the researcher with detail classification and consideration to all the specified criteria listed on the rubric. Additionally, analytic rubrics are useful for students who need more precise suggestion for improving their language (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010: 128).

The researcher selected some of the students' writing product which contain some errors in it, and used them as a basis to observe their practical progress while the research is conducted. The analysis is based on the aspects stated in the analytical writing rubric. The figure below is the example of students' errors in organisation.

At that time before the race started a few days ago the band we've held a joint exercise, at home Ratih. And the next day after practice we will follow the race acoustic band, we are all nervous when we will follow the race, but after to place goal we've not nervous anymore and when place the goal we also still exercise even though only briefly. After that we were visited by the committee of SMK 3 Negara that gives us no lottery number 4. Sometime later we were called to go forward on stage, and we also sang plenty only by nosstress and jumping higher by sheila on 7, after we sing the song we await the announcement of the winner will we achieve. After all accoustic band has performed and the time that notice was announced winner finally we got the 1st place as the spirit of hope even though we will not be broken and then we came we each.

Figure 1. Sample of Student's Writing Product

Figure 1 shows us an example of a simple paragraph talking about the subject's experience when he joined up an acoustic band competition. The idea is somehow understandable. However, the paragraph actually consists of more than one idea. If it is narrowed to series of events, there should be at least two events; they are the preparation to join a competition and also the D-day activity. This has led the student into a digression of ideas. Moreover, the writing is also influenced by the use of run-on sentence which disturbs the writer's intention. The run-on sentence can be clearly seen from the sentence, "And

the next day after practice we will follow the race acoustic band, we are all nervous when we will follow the race, but after to place goal we've not nervous anymore and when place the goal we also still exercise even though only briefly". This sentence actually should be separated into several sentences because it has more than one idea. Besides, the researcher noted some misunderstanding on vocabulary usage, for instance, the student wrote "race" instead of "competition", and overgeneralising the use of word "sometime". As for wrong grammatical usage, most of them are found in the tenses used by the students.

Visit Mount Batur

*Last weekend, my family for a holiday. The goal of the tourist attentions in mount Batur, our family is really like. My family take a trip to get there by car.
My family a few hours we finaly got there. I'm felt happy family. The parents we mount Batur the beautiful. I am and brothers pictures, my family came home.*

Figure 2. Sample of Student's Writing Product

Figure 2 shows how the inability of students to use grammar properly affects their writing result. Many words are omitted. The omission can be clearly seen from the very beginning of the paragraph. The first sentence, "Last Holiday, my family for a holiday", cannot be called as a sentence because the verb is not there or omitted. The other wrong use of grammar is located on the sentence "The goal of the attractions in mount batur, our family is really like". This sentence is not a complete sentence. Besides, there is a

wrong use of the word "like". The writer meant that he likes the attraction found in mount Batur, but the use of *to be* had made it become a description. Somehow, the ideas of these sentences are understandable. However, due to the numerous grammatical inaccuracies, these sentences become unclear.

Conclusion

Identifying students' problem in writing is a crucial part of teaching writing. Before teacher decides any

treatment that should have been given, confirming the problems is prominent. Based on the findings on this study, students are likely to receive the lesson well. However, when they start to write their own texts, they stuck on describing the setting and the background of their text. However, sequencing plot into a good organisation still becomes their major problem.

The students' problems were also confirmed through the analysis of their products. Most of their problem occurs on the organisation of ideas and paragraph, grammar accuracy, and lack of vocabulary mastery. These findings should be a basis for other prospective research that works on similar areas.

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