

AN ANALYSIS OF WRITING PROBLEMS OF PGSD UNNES STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Writing is considered a productive skill and useful tool for learning process. It is the most used skill in evaluating students' performance in almost all levels of education. In Indonesia, tertiary level students still face enormous writing problems in English. The objective of this present study aims to explore writing problems of students of PGSD (Primary School Teacher Education) Department, Faculty of Education, Semarang State University (UNNES), and the study is also intended to share some recommendations how students can get overcome those problems. The study was conducted on 160 students of PGSD UNNES from the same level. The data were taken through document collection and questionnaire. Moreover, a semi-structured interview on two lecturers has been conducted to reflect their attitudes and opinion on students' English writing problems. The results of this study showed that students face many problems when writing English. The problems could be classified into some categories. In addition, a few recommendations are provided on the basis of the result. This study could help the teachers/lecturers to resolve the problems and find some strategies to improve students' writing in English.

Keywords: writing problems, students of PGSD UNNES, the same Level

Introduction

In communicative language teaching, writing is one of the four basic language skills, and it holds a major part of learning a language because students are to sit for examination to prove their competence by writing properly. In Indonesia, English is taught as a compulsory subject from primary level to higher secondary level. Even the English language has been adopted as a medium of instruction in some universities because English has become "the medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge" (Crystal, 2003). Nonetheless, the frustrating news that most of the students at the tertiary level, especially in primary school teacher education department (PGSD) of Semarang State University (UNNES) are very weak in the writing skills. After completing their secondary and higher secondary level, they fail to show their expected competency. In this regard, Hoque (Khan & Akter, 2011)

notes, "Despite the considerable amount of time devoted to English instruction, the general proficiency and achievement of the majority of the students graduating from high schools is unsatisfactory and disproportionately low."

In Indonesia, many state and private universities offer different English language courses along with the core courses in various departments to teach writing as a skill, and the objective of these courses is to sharper learners' language skills for academic, professional or personal purposes. However, the outcome is not satisfactory. The proficiency level of English among students is very low due to their educational background. Most of the students are not able to write effectively. That's why it is more challenging teaching writing skills in English language, especially whose English language course/study is non-major (especially PGSD Department Students.

They are not motivated, and feel burdened in the English language classroom. They also feel daunted by the classroom activities. That's why writing skills to non-English major students is really problematic.

At Semarang State University, especially as PGSD Department, the subject/course of English is taught for two semesters. This course has an objective to give students competencies to master four skills of English (especially writing) to support their educational knowledge through mastering of English.

This study aims to find out the writing problems of PGSD Unnes students. The study is also intended to share some recommendations how students can get overcome those problems.

Writing skills are an important part of communication for students throughout their academic life because it allows them to organize their feelings and ideas clearly as well as to convey meaning through well-constructed text. David Nunan (2003) defines:

Writing is both a physical and mental act. At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader.

In the recent years or more, there has been a growing concern in developing writing skills in the higher education as education diversifies at this stage. Learners go on to more specific knowledge acquiring situation where their writing has to more focused and specific oriented (Rahman, 2009). According to Bjork and Raisen: We highlight the importance of writing in all university curricula not only because of its immediate practical application, *i.e.* as an isolated skill or ability, but because we believe that, seen from a broader perspective, writing is a thinking tool. It is a tool for language development, for critical thinking and, extension, for learning in all disciplines (Khairy, 2013).

It is mentioned earlier in Indonesia English is taught compulsorily in all levels of education. Khan and Akter (2013) note in their study:

In our teaching-learning context, writing skill is usually considered as a clear proof of whether learners learnt English well or not. Learners sit for different examinations and get grades/scores on the basis of writing ability. Although other three skills are more or less practiced in the class, only writing ability is assessed for grades or scores in the examination.

University students must be able to write clearly about topics related to their research fields (Mustaque, 2014). Even after practicing writing for a long time students face numerous writing problems when they join university for higher education. Uddin (2014) writes in his study, "Writing is the most focused but the least developed English language skill among the university learners. At tertiary level the situation is not different". It is an assertion that the importance of writing is not unique to liberal arts or social sciences alone but is also germane in science and technology courses (Bodunde and Sotiloye, 2013). Dudley-Evans and St. John (in Khairy, 2013) states that success in the relevant fields depends on the factor that how effectively the students handle different writing genres like summaries, essays, reviews, etc. This is applicable to the students of all disciplines in English-major and non-major students in particular.

Students may face many problems in their English writing as L2/foreign writers. In this regard, Alam mentioned, "It is often found that students may have knowledge about vocabulary and grammatical aspects (e.g. using the right tenses, collocation, and prepositions) but face problems in writing coherently and restructuring ideas after evaluating them" (Mustaque, 2014).

According to Heaton (1979): The writing skill in a foreign language is complex and difficult to learn not only the ability to use structures, but also conceptual of varied skills such as stylistic and mechanical skill. Stylistic skill is the ability

to manipulate sentences and use language effectively whereas mechanical skill is the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language such as punctuation and spelling.

A growing mass of research has offered valuable insights into the significance of this skill for academic success. In Indonesia many researchers have studied on students' writing problems. In their research, Khan and Akter (2011) identified undergraduate students' word and sentences level mistakes in English writing. In this regard, they suggested,

“In the training curriculum, aims and objectives should be appropriately designed and utilized to make sure it is effectively linking the praxis of writing which is inevitably essential in today's English teaching and learning context.”

Ahmad (1999) found in his study that students are seriously prone to making mistakes in English articles. He pointed out that mistakes occurred because of the differences between Indonesian and English languages. In her study, Mustaque (2014) reveals undergraduate students' writing samples exhibit innumerable errors, *i.e.* lexio-semantic errors, errors with verbs, prepositions, articles. She illustrates that the participants write without any planning, purposeless.

In another study by Fahmida (2010) identifies Indonesian tertiary level students' common errors in their academic essay. Different types of errors are spelling, punctuation and organizational problems. She recommends that more intensive English courses should be there before they take their major course of their respected area.

Various studies have been carried out focusing on error analysis of ESL learners in different language and culture contexts. Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) investigate the gaps in English language teaching and learning that exist between post-basic schools and universities in the Sultanate of Oman. They also identify that, “Majority of students, representing both educational contexts struggle with lexical

and content aspects of writing; however, university students' perceptions of the kind of problems they encounter and of the strategies to address them are more assertive.”

After doing research on Chinese students Darus and Ching (2009) showed that the four most common errors made by the Chinese students are the mechanics of writing, tenses, prepositions, and subject-verb agreement. Another research of Javed and Umer (2014) revealed that students have serious problems in their academic writing due to their weaknesses in using appropriate lexical items, organization of ideas and grammar. The other weaker areas are prepositions, spellings, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, suffixes and prefixes.

Therefore, we can see that many researchers have found that writing in a second language poses many problems for the majority of English as a foreign language (EFL) learner. In Indonesia (especially at PGSD Unnes students) undergraduate students have still an alarming tendency to make mistakes in syntactical and lexical level. Many researchers have also offered valuable insights into the approaches of teaching writing skills.

Methodology

1. Participants

All the participants in this study are students of PGSD Unnes (primary school teacher education department of Semarang State University). The number of participants are 160 students (four classes). The age of the students ranges 18-19 years. They are all the students in year 1 of PGSD Department of Semarang State University. This study was conducted in 2016 (semester 1 and 2) at Campus of PGSD Department of Unnes. These learners have already finished their secondary and higher secondary level where English was a compulsory subject. On the other hand, the researchers also provided a questionnaire of eleven close-ended statements to the selected students from the same Institute to elicit their responses. A

semi-structured interview is taken as well from two lecturers who are currently teaching the students.

2. Data Collection

Data were collected through writing sample analysis, questionnaire and interviews.

a. Writing Samples

As instruments the researcher used to collect data from writing samples of the participants and questionnaires. Writing samples were chosen as a research instrument to get a clear picture about the writing problems of PGSD Unnes students. For collecting data, two descriptive topics were given in a time pressure of sixty minutes. The participants were assured that their writing samples won't be counted in exam, and it's just a writing activity. This made the participants feel free and comfortable in writing a paragraph. The participants were informed that they had to start with prewriting then a final draft. The students did not know that their writings are going to be under investigation. In the first topic, students were asked to write a descriptive paragraph about "Their Motivation to Study at PGSD Unnes", and the second topic students were asked to write about "Their Opinion about Conservation at Unnes". The students were asked to write freely and to express their ideas clearly about those topics. The writing samples presented a vivid picture about the students' composing & writing problems. As all the participants were the direct students of the researcher, she managed to collect writing samples and questionnaire in her scheduled class time.

b. Questionnaire

Another research instrument used by the researcher to collect data was a written questionnaire which included eleven close ended questions with fixed alternatives covering the research questions as well as subject related. The questionnaire was delivered to each of the 160 students. Each student completed and returned the

questionnaire. While filling up the questionnaire, students were asked that writing their name was not mandatory, it is optional. The questions in the questionnaire were set to obtain information about their attitude, problems, opinions and motivations as a PGSD Unnes student. These questions were designed to gather information about the problems which they are facing while writing and their way of dealing with them. The result of the survey conducted among the participants was counted into percentage. From the responses of the participants the researcher finds out the reasons of their writing problems.

c. Interviews

Two lecturers who were offering courses to first year undergraduate students & currently teaching were interviewed to find out their perceptions of the PGSD Unnes undergraduate students' writing problems. Each interview lasted about twenty minutes. The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed by the researchers.

Findings and Discussion

1. Findings from Writing Samples

The results of this study showed that students face many problems when writing English. It is an undeniable fact that an understanding of a language grammar is essential, and as it is said vocabulary is the flesh of the language and grammar is the skeleton. An analysis of the students' paragraphs revealed that various kinds of mistakes made students writing weak. Sentence levels grammatical mistakes committed by the students, namely spelling, subject-verb agreement, articles, preposition, capitalization, fragments, punctuation, tense, etc. they have also problems with paragraph structure, coherence and cohesion, etc. By examining the writing samples of the students, it can be presumed that a significant number of the students that is 88% cannot organize their ideas. While writing they show more concern for language related problems.



a. Category of Writing Problems

Table 1 gives a statistical summary of the main writing problems noted from the students' writing samples arranged on the basis of raw frequency rank order starting with the highest to the lowest frequencies.

i. Spelling Mistakes

As can be seen from Table 1, the spelling mistakes are the most common writing problem noted throughout this study 822 (20.64%). It ranks number one out of eleven. Students have a tendency to spell words according to their pronunciations. They commit spelling errors of letter omission, addition, transposition and substitution, etc. For example, attractive (attractive), together (together), favorit (favorite), famas (famous), etc. Presumably a lot of spelling mistakes occurred because of L1 interference. Actually, in Indonesian language students usually learn to spell words, according to orthographically rather than phonetically. That's the main reason to spell wrong words in English.

Table 1. Classification of writing problems and percentage per category

Category of writing problems	Frequencies of writing problems	Percentage (%)
Spelling	822	20.64
Tense	687	17.25
Subject-verb agreement	564	14.16
Punctuation	410	10.30
Fragment	324	8.14
Preposition	285	7.16
Number	231	5.80
Pronoun	178	4.47
Misuse of words/wordiness	172	4.32
Articles	166	4.17
Capitalization	143	3.59
Total	3982	100

ii. Misuse of Tense

The second most common problem faced by students is the misuse of tense of their writing 687 (17.25%). They are unaware about mixing both present and past tense in the same paragraph or sentence. On the other hand, English does have numerous possible tenses (verb forms), and their uses are not always helpful to the learner. The past simple tense, for example, can be used to talk about the future: If I had a lot of money, I would buy you a new car. So Many students get confused which tense (verb form) is required to express clearly the meaning that they wish to convey.

iii. Subject-Verb Agreement

Students have always been taught to use a verb which should agree with its subject. In spite of that, many errors were made in this area 564 (14.16%). They use a plural verb with singular subject and *vice-versa*.

iv. Punctuation & Fragments

Some students made fragments when they wanted to write complex sentences. Because of wrong punctuation, so many sentence fragments, comma splice and run-on sentences were found. Sometimes their long sentences became over-loaded sentence without proper punctuation. Punctuation mistakes were made by students which constitute 410 (10.30%), and mistakes made with fragments were 324 (8.14%).

v. Preposition

Most of the students were found to use an unnecessary preposition in their writing 285 (7.16%). In some cases, they added inappropriate preposition.

vi. Number

The total mistakes made with regard to the number were 231 (5.80%) which proof that undergraduates students' still had difficulty in understanding the concepts of the singular and plural number in their writing.

vii. Pronoun

The number of mistakes related to the right use of pronoun agreement and references 178 (4.47%).

viii. Misuse of words & word choice

Students had mother tongue interference in their writing. They often misuse translation from Indonesian to English. They also make errors in the choice of the suitable words or phrases that add nothing to the meaning. The total mistakes that occurred in relation to misuse of words & word choices were 172 (4.32%).

ix. Misuse of articles

Undergraduate students still had difficulty in understanding the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness. Some students had a tendency to use “the” where it is not necessary. In some cases, our students over-corrected themselves by using articles hastily. The number of total mistakes made with regard to article was 166 (4.17%).

x. Capitalization

The number of mistakes related to capitalization 143 (3.59%), especially pronoun I & writing a letter as an uppercase and others as a lower case based on specific rules.

b. Organizational Problems

When we talk about effective writing, we often think first about elements like word choice, grammar and mechanics, and content or evidence. However, a really important part of effective writing is logical organization. The researcher analyzed the problems from the content of the paragraph writing. At first, the students were asked to write a descriptive paragraph. Most of them did not follow a beginning, middle, and an end. Students failed to write an effective topic sentence, supporting details and concluding line. These samples create the impression that the participants fail to form

any clear idea about their writing topic. They fail to generate ideas and lack appropriate information. Lack of structure, unity and irrelevant ideas were found in their writings. Both paragraphs were lack of transitional phrases. The majority of the students had limited vocabulary and struggled to express their ideas. Plagiarism was a serious writing problem among most of the students. Repetition was another problem. It is evident that that students struggling when they write in English. They never bother to plan their composition and all they think just to pass exam which lead to poor and ineffective writing at the end. Only a few students able to organize ideas coherently, fulfilled the required word limit, fewer errors, and seldom include any irrelevant ideas.

2. Findings from a Questionnaire

Table 2 shows the questionnaire administered to the students and the number of respondents per each degree of response. The majority of students do not have sufficient command over the necessary sentence structures for writing in English (90%). They do not feel confident to express their ideas in writing (76%); they cannot write on any relevant topic easily (79%). The majority of the students do not use prewriting techniques (65%). They do not practice in home for writing (93%); however, they like the courses in which they are taught writing English (72%). They are encouraged by the teachers to practice writing in English in the classroom (94%); nonetheless, they are not motivated in non-English major Classes (72%). Students are not more concern about grammar rather than organization patterns of writing (68%). Some students reveal that they like the English language courses for developing their skill (71%); however, the majority of the students think their English is not better now than it was at the college (72%).

On the other hand, a few students use prewriting techniques (39%), they can write easily on any relevant topic easily (25%). A few students practice at home for

writing (11%). They do not like the courses in which they are taught writing English (32%). The minority reveals that they do feel confident to express their ideas in writing (28%); they have sufficient command over the necessary sentence structures for writing in English (14%). Some students do not like the English language courses for developing their skill (33%). A few students are encouraged by teachers to practice writing in English in the classroom (10%) and motivated in the English language classroom (32%). Some students are (36%) more concern about the organizational patterns of writing rather than grammar and think their English is now better than it was at the college (32%).

Table 2. Summary of findings from a questionnaire

Questions Topic	Answer Type	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Do you have sufficient command over the necessary sentence structures for writing in English?	Yes	16	10
	No	144	90
Are you more concern about your grammar rather organization pattern of writing?	Yes	51	32
	No	109	68
Can you easily write on any relevant topic?	Yes	33	21
	No	127	79
Do you use prewriting techniques?	Yes	56	35
	No	104	65
Do you practice at home for writing?	Yes	11	7
	No	149	93
Do you feel confident in your ability to express your ideas in writing?	Yes	38	24
	No	122	76
Do you feel motivated in your non-major English classes?	Yes	45	28
	No	115	72
Do you like the English languages courses for developing your writing skill?	Yes	115	72
	No	45	28
Do you like the way in which you are taught English writing skill?	Yes	109	68
	No	51	32

Do your teachers encourage you to practice writing in English in the classroom?	Yes	150	94
	No	10	6
Do you think your English now better than it was at the college?	Yes	51	32
	No	109	68

3. Findings from Interviews

The responses of the interviewees were counted into percentage after conducting the semi-structured interviews. The assorted responses from interviews with ten lecturers and two senior lecturers tended to agree in many ways.

- a. All the interviewees in this study mentioned that grammatical weakness was the main problem of PGSD Unnes undergraduate students.
- b. Lack of vocabulary and motivation are the reasons behind the weakness in English writing skill. Students do not participate in the classroom. They are just mute spectators and do not reveal their writing problems. Sometimes students do not ask for the teacher any kind of clarification or solution.
- c. Another problem was knowledge and understanding. Students do not know the process of writing and how to write a topic. Overall, they do not know how to develop supporting details.
- d. Lecturers believe that almost most of the students never write outside the classroom even for assigned assignments. That is the major problem for students because this practice makes them becoming a weaker writer. They just write in the classroom and exam hall.
- e. Lecturers believe that students' educational background plays a major role of their weakness of writing. In Indonesia majority students are from Indonesian medium and curriculum designs are exam oriented. That is why they feel comfortable with Indonesian writing.

- f. Memorization is only one tool to get good grades for Indonesian medium students which hampers their English writing capabilities.
- g. All the interviewees, 92% acknowledged that their emphasis had been on semester course content coverage and presentations. They also expressed because of time limitation it becomes difficult to attend to individual writing problems.
- h. All lecturers (100%) blamed that students are more concerned about their major English study, and one of the most common allegations from students is that they do not have much time for studying their English course and always show excuses for not improving their writing skill. They used to find out how to manage to get a medium grade for an English course. Thus, make them becoming a weak writer and do not feel comfortable with their study at an English medium university.

4. Limitations of the Study

The research was conducted on four classes (each class consisting of 40 students) where 160 students took part in the research process, and they were all private university students and from the same Institute. Another limitation of the study is that the students' data is collected through questionnaire and the writing samples. Through the questionnaire, the findings reflect mere opinions of students about their problems in writing. Interview of the students could have been more helpful to collect appropriate data. The findings of this study do not have the required authenticity to be generalizable. Another demerit of the study was that we just found out teachers' opinions about causes of students writing problems. However, the study does not reflect what teachers do in the classroom based on these problems. So, further extensive research through classroom observation is required to validate the outcomes of this study.

5. Recommendations

It is not very easy to draw general recommendations based on the findings of this study that investigated all the participants; however, relevant solution or suggestion may support to some extent:

- a. The findings suggest that the numbers of English language courses (studies) that are offered for PGSD Unnes students as well as the opportunities of writing practice in the classrooms are not sufficient. It is strongly recommended that the language courses should be increased for PGSD Unnes Students to strengthen all the language skills in general especially in writing.
- b. In fact, the students who are taught writing in the traditional way do not know how to write standard paragraphs and essays. The way they practice writing in their academic setting, make them to focus on the finished written product rather than the writing process. Many undergraduate students are still weak in Indonesian writing let alone in writing English because they are not taught how to write academically even in their first language (Indonesian). If these students are taught the basics and strategies of writing in general, they will learn to write in the exam as well as acquire the ability to produce coherent writing on any topic.
- c. Actually, the traditional teaching method is a major cause for students' weak writing, and it is strongly recommended that lecturers should provide their students with as many opportunities to practice the target language as possible. No doubt good writing depends on the mastery of the grammar of the target language.
- d. To enrich vocabulary, learners should spend some amount of their time based on their limitations. They should follow a good ESL learners'

English to English Dictionary such as Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary to look up the meaning of unknown and difficult words. In addition, they should maintain a diary to note down the usage of these words.

- e. Adequate teaching aids and modern equipment should be provided in university to motivate the students to use English with the teachers/lecturers.
- f. Motivation and attitude are not only related to the learners, but to the teacher/lecturer him/herself. Curriculum design should be revised for PGSD Unnes students. The questions set for the exams should be creative, not repetitive. Improving writing problems should be treated as a long-term job.
- g. Feedback is intended to help our students improve their own writing. The weak students should be divided into small groups and put under the supervision of the teachers/lecturers for the whole period of their study at the university. It is always helpful to encourage students to use different activities and strategies to improve their writing, e.g. keep a journal, poster presentation, use a word processor, etc. The English teachers/lecturers need to spend a great deal of time checking, marking and giving feedback to their students.

Conclusion

The study has tried to identify major writing problems of PGSD Unnes undergraduate students. It has been also found that grammatical weakness, less practice, lack of motivation and educational background were the main reasons behind the weakness of PGSD Unnes students. To overcome those problems, students need the proper guidelines, and at the same time students have to find out their own writing problems to become a good writer. The curriculum

should pay more attention to learners' needs as well. It is useful to raise the learners' confidence, and to do that the task of developing English language, especially writing skills cannot be done by the English course teachers/lecturers alone. All other course teachers/lecturers should share the work.

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