AN ANALYSIS OF EFL STUDENTS' PARAGRAPH WRITING: ERRORS AND THEIR CAUSES

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Abstract
Students' difficulties in language learning have been extensively researched as they play an important role in teaching. The study can reveal the source of difficulties that can be used as consideration in determining the best remedy for the students and can provide a guideline for the teachers to create a better instruction. To this concern, the current paper reported on an analysis of students' paragraph writing papers, by focusing on the errors made by them. This study employed content analysis research method by examining 26 paragraphs scripts collected from the exam papers of the first year university students of Unit 1 majoring in English Education of State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry, Aceh academic year 2015-2016. The students were instructed to write free topics following the structure of paragraph. The students' errors were identified, grouped and analyzed. The findings indicated that most of the students' errors in terms of organization of paragraph were on all components; topic sentences, supporting sentences and concluding sentences. In addition, students' errors were also found in language structure. It was also identified that Syntactic and stylistic errors were the most frequently mistakes committed by the students. The pedagogical recommendation of writing skill was also presented through this study.

Keywords: Students' errors, writing skill, paragraph writing.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher's analysis on of students' works such as paragraphs, essays, reports, etc. writing product is not merely to know the content of the writing but also any aspects of the writing itself, such as language features and structures. Concerning those aspects, it is undeniable that analysis of students' work is important. However, to write a well-developed piece of writing like a paragraph is a labyrinthine complex process for the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student. Since English is not their mother tongue, students certainly have their own inclination in producing a piece of writing although teachers have taught them the ways and steps in writing.

This study examines students' paragraphs in order to know the difficulties encountered by them in terms of paragraph organization and language structure. It is expected that the students produce a well-developed paragraph by following three paragraph components; topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. Moreover, in order to help the analysis, the researcher used content analysis research method. It is hoped that the analysis would bring some advantages for the researcher and also teachers to develop a better teaching instruction, particularly in teaching writing skill.

Writing Challenges in EFL Classrooms

Writing difficulties among EFL students have been researched widely. Writing is difficult because students need to pay attention to several matters in their writing such as content or ideas, organization, structure, word choices and word forms and mechanics which means using the right correct punctuation, spelling and capitalization. Writing skill is even more challenging for EFL students because it is a complex process since they are expected to produce written work that are syntactically accurate, semantically acceptable and culturally appropriate (Abu Raas, 2015, p. 49).

According to Raimes (1993) there are two types of writing for EFL, they are "writing for learning", which includes pre-writing, drafting, revisions and editing, and "writing for display" such as examination writing. In display writing, comprehending the requirements of the question is essential to success. Indeed, the students struggle with the atmosphere of examination and time constraints. It means that students have to be able to experience the planning quickly without help. Moreover, the ability to write formulaic well-structured written language is also important. Students who can employ appropriate language as it is used by the native speaker will perform better than those whose linguistic resources are translated from their mother tongue (Grossman, 2009, p. 4).

A study conducted on writing problems by Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) revealed that the biggest difficulties in writing among Omani school and university are deciding how to start the essay/ paragraph. Most of them followed the formulaic form of paragraph handed by the teacher to them, and they tended to follow that pattern and are difficult to express their original ideas. It is portrayed that writing is complex and needs a comprehensive ways to learn.

Difficulties in teaching writing in EFL context has been triggered by several factors. Zitouni (2015, p. 24) states that lacks some necessary conditions of teaching such as the appropriate teacher feedback given to the students, and the ability of the teachers to create a relaxed situation in the classroom becomes a challenging task for teachers to offer good atmosphere of teaching. In addition, factors as class size, time limitation, and students' problems have a great impact in teaching writing. Similarly, according to Leki (1995) teaching writing in EFL classes is in some way a hard job to be accomplished because of some reasons. First, crowded classroom big is considered as a first barrier to teachers. Second, time may not support teachers to fulfill their objectives or even presenting their tutorials. Besides, it becomes demanding task for teachers to correct and give written feedback for each student. Undeniably, another difficulty is the interference of students' first language (L1) with the target language, foreign language. Most of the first languages of EFL students' have no tenses as that of the English. Therefore, the errors on related to grammar are mostly noticeable (Zitouni, 2015; Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2014; Ghabool, 2012)

Previous Studies on EFL Writing Difficulties

Many studies have been conducted on students' writing difficulties, either in English as Second Language (ESL) or EFL context. Most of the findings of the studies showed that EFL students faced serious problems in writing in English and they had difficulties in expressing their thought on papers. A study conducted by Al-Buainain (2007) on EFL students in University of Qatar majoring in English revealed that most of their errors were found on the content, and the capability to demonstrate their linguistic ability such as the use of appropriate vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, etc. He argued that those problems were caused by many factors such as inappropriate teaching method and types of feedback.

Another current study conducted on two groups of third year English students registered at Mohamed Khider university of Biskra proved Al- Buainain findings that written feedback has a great, positive impact in improving the students' paragraphs (Zitouni, 2015). She contends that the teachers' role is very important in increasing the student's level, but this purpose cannot be achieved unless some strategies of commenting, response, feedback should be presented by teacher in order to evaluate the student paragraphs. Other study on EFL students in writing composition at the Iraqi Preparatory Schools showed that insufficient time (40 minutes) in practicing their writing in the classroom become a major problem. Besides, students also have problem in utilizing good vocabulary in their writing, thus it makes them difficult in expressing their thought in English (Abdul Kareem, 2014).

In another study on EFL students' deficiencies in writing, Muslim (2014) confirmed the effectiveness of the experimental way of repetition; competition and practice with feedback on

helping students that improves their writing. Focusing on dividing students into groups and building teamwork between them, creating challenges among students in order to compete with each other and giving students feedback in order that they could diagnose their shortcomings and later on correct they have shown very effective in improving students' writing.

Process Writing Approach

Process writing approach is an approach of writing in which the students focus on the process of writing in producing a piece of writing product rather than on the product of writing itself. In this approach, the students are required more to understand the process of writing, generating ideas, outlining, drafting, and writing a final paper. Nunan (1991) stated that the process approach writing concentrates in steps of producing a piece of writing that involve reflecting on, discussing and reworking on good drafts of a text. Similarly, according to Bayat (2014, p. 1134) process writing approach treats writing not as a finished product but as a process. He further stated that the role of teacher is only as a supervisor. Moreover, this approach excels other methods. Ho (2006, p. 2) urged that comparing to traditional methods that stress on writing product, the process approach has brought about improvement of writing instruction over years. It has been implemented to different level of teaching models, the process approach of writing has been believed to cause significant result in creating a better writing (Sun, 2009, p. 155).

METHODS

It is a qualitative study using a content analysis method in analyzing the data. Content analysis method is used because it is considered appropriate to apply for examining students' errors and finding out the causes of them. Moreover, this approach has been widely used in social sciences for analyzing the content of any kinds of texts. The data of the study is 26 paragraph scripts, collected from 26 of first year students majoring in English education Department whose ages range from eighteen to twenty years. The students were asked to write free topic paragraph in the exam examination that contain 200 to 250 words in a time pressure of one hour. They were asked to write freely and to express their ideas based on structure of a good paragraph that consists of three components; topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. Students were allowed to write free topics because of two reasons. Firstly, the target of writing I class was merely to understand the paragraph format and its components not to understand different types of paragraphs. Finally, to ease the students generated their ideas and lower the examination pressure; the researcher did not strictly determine the topics.

Data Analysis

After collecting students' exam papers, the next step is analyzing students' errors to find out their difficulties in writing a paragraph. Categorically, this study addresses two levels of analysis; paragraph level and sentence level. The analysis employed on the paragraph level errors deal with the three components of paragraph: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. The errors found then were tabulated. In addition, the analysis of the sentence level errors included the following category: syntactic, semantic and stylistic. For instance, when the sentence use wrong verb form or has no verb, it falls under the syntactic category. The error is considered semantic when the words are not used in the appropriate context. Stylistic refers to the transfer of the Indonesian stylistics in English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented in the tables below. Both paragraph and sentence were analyzed in term of frequency of errors, and then they were counted in to percentages.

Table 1. The total of Errors found in Paragraph Analysis.

Paragraph analysis	Frequency	Percentage
Topic sentence	6	28.57%
Supporting Sentence		
• No Examples and minor supporting sentences provided	4	19.05%

Table 1 continued…

• Only major Supporting Sentences with examples	2	9.52%
• No transition and examples	1	4.77%
• No Examples	2	9.52%
Concluding sentence	6	28.57%
Total Errors	21	100%

Table 2. The total of Errors found in Sentence Analysis.

Sentence analysis	Frequency	Percentage
Syntactic Errors	105	43.76%
Semantic Errors	53	22.08
Stylistic Errors	82	34.16
Total Errors	240	100%

From the table above, it can be seen that the students errors are depicted in all paragraph components and three categories of sentence analysis. In paragraph analysis, the number of error of topic sentence is similar to the number of error in concluding sentence. It is logically true because the concluding sentence is a restatement or a summary of topic sentence. Therefore, if the topic sentence is incorrect, the concluding sentence is possibly wrong. Then, the other errors are also portrayed in stating the supporting sentences. The students seemed difficult in writing more elaborate detail in these sentences. Most of the students wrote major supporting sentences but some major supporting sentences had no examples and minor supporting sentences. Besides, the students had difficulties in writing transitions in connecting the ideas, thus, it makes the paragraph less coherence.

The similar thing happens to the analysis of sentences. Most errors are identified in syntax. It can be identified that the students have problems in constructing subject verb agreement and sometimes wrong form of verbs and others have missing verbs. The interference of Indonesian to their writing is also found. Most of the students write their paragraph similar to the way they write in Indonesian, thus, the transliteration errors are found. Another error is found in semantic. In this part, the students use inappropriate words in the context of their topics. However, semantic errors are less frequently occurred. More explanation about all the errors is further explained in the discussion below. The following excerpts are taken from students' paragraphs. Those sentences represented the errors in term of paragraph and sentence level. The explanation of sentence analysis is also provided concurrently.

Inappropriate Topic Sentences
1. *Everywhere we found many people consumsion junk food.*
2. *Many people like chocolate*
3. *Many people don't know date have many effect to our health.*
4. *Indonesian students go abroad to experience other cultures and to attend abroad universities,*
5. *Now, smoking is the biggest problem in the world.*

Supporting Sentences
1. *Firstly, one of the good activity is reading Alquran in ramadhan, of course we will read more alquran in ramadhan and there we can help each other to read in a good tajwid.*
2. *Firstly, I am not a talk active person, so that I don't have good mental for speaking in front of a lot of people, for example, I got tramble every time I have to speak in front of public.*
3. *My teacher was ordered me for speech in front of class, with confidence I came forward the class, I speech antusiasticly, at the middle of my speech, suddenly I forgot the text, I was silence for a moment, and after a moment I cried in front of my friends.*
4. *30 minutes later, we were ready and immediately went to the mosque to perform Eid pray, the exclamation were reverberated when we walked into the mosque, and the mosque became a crowded atmosphere.*
5. *Then, junk food has too much sugar and it will contain diabetes.*

Concluding Sentences

1. *So we must change that habit before many people will be in health before this world will be broke we must leave this problem.*
2. *In short, the date can make your life feel good, delicious to eat and good for you health.*
3. *Overall, many people like chocolate, because chocolate is good taste, delicious food, many kinds of chocolate and you can choice what do you want.*
4. *In short junk food not good for our health, you can consumsion it but not too much.*
5. *In short, education is very important for us. So that why we must have the good education in this life.*

From the samples, it can be seen that the topic sentences has unclear controlling idea. Most of them are written broadly while topic sentence surely needs to be specific containing topic and comment (Abu Rass, 2015; Broadman & Frydernberg, 2008). The first sentence is personalized with the use of pronoun "we" but the sentence still general that contain only topic "junk food" without any clear information what the paragraph will be about. So the readers, by reading this topic sentence, still cannot predict what the paragraph about. These errors occur for a lot of reasons. Lack acquaintance with the English writing style is perhaps the cause of the errors. Moreover, students at the first year are difficult to start their writing and mostly write it too personal or general. It can be seen from the samples that the students have difficulties in writing a good topic sentence. When it link to the syntactic structure and stylistic aspect, the errors occur in the word order, it can be seen in the first sentence. The adverb "everywhere "without punctuation comma was constructed in the beginning which is not the style of English writing. In this term, the transfer of Indonesian style of writing is clearly depicted. In addition, the errors in the spelling and noun form are also found as in the words "consumsion" which must be consumption and "effect" that should be in plural form effects. Moreover, the student also make an error in use of verb, the noun "consumption" in the first sentence must be verb "consume".

In writing the supporting sentences, these students also encounter problems. Most samples of the supporting sentences lack examples. Even though the students indicate the reasons in the supporting sentences as in sentence one and two, still, the sentences written long and break the rule of English writing. On the other hand, sentences number three and four are neither reasons nor examples provided. Yet, they contain a series of clauses without inappropriate use of conjunction and punctuation. When it refers to Link to language structure, the students have difficulties in writing compound and complex sentence. It is in line with the argument of Al-Khatib (2001) and Abu Raas (2015) concerning the preference to write long sentences with inappropriate use of coordinating conjunctions. Moreover, the use of cohesive devices for adding information such as "in addition, moreover" etc. is not found in the sentences. However, most students continue writing long clauses that neither follow sentence nor paragraph structure in English by using "and", "also", and "so" intensely.

Besides, the errors are also found in the spelling as in sentences two and three. Moreover, in sentence three, the student makes more errors. Wrong structure of the sentence is clearly seen here, passive was made instead of active voice. Missing verb also occurred as in *for speech* instead of to give a speech. This error is Indonesian transfer, where *Speech* in Indonesian means *pidato* which also can be a verb *berpidato* that means *to give a speech*. Then, another transfer is also found in the use of adverb. The use of *with* which means *dengan* is common in Indonesian to express adverb of manner. In English, this style of writing is considered wordily, *with confidence* instead of using "ly" by deriving confidence into *confidently*. In addition, lack of preposition and wrong word form also occurred. These kinds of error cannot be avoided by EFL students. They tend to translate their ideas in their native language and put it on the paper. It is similar to what Bennui (2008) stated that some L1 characteristics of EFL/ ESL students will appear when they write in the target language because their native language make more sense to them than English.

Further, the supporting details written are also confusing unclear. It is found that the students mention several things in general, for example in sentence one, four and five. The word *tajwid* and *exclamation* cannot be understood by the readers easily. In this case, the students assumed the readers recognized their points. Semantic problem is also found in sentence six, which the meaning is difficult and out of sense to be understood by the readers. However, the rest of the supporting

details are quite clear. Using phrases instead of writing a sentence is also observed in the student's supporting sentences as in the sentence number five.

In concluding sentences, transition signals are used excessively. It shows that the students understand the paragraph writing style of English. However, the Indonesian transfer still can be seen. For example, the students write a redundancy of transition signals *in short…..So….* in concluding their sentences. The use of *so* is common in concluding a sentence in Indonesian. Therefore, the students still add *so* even though there is transition signal such as in short, etc.

Furthermore, having analyzed twenty six students' paragraphs, it is found that four paragraphs did not follow the format –between supporting sentences and concluding sentence the students indented it. Moreover, two paragraphs have no concluding sentence. The rest of the scripts show developed way of writing paragraph in English with only a few numbers of errors related to syntactic problems such as verb forms. For example *people can looking for the job, we only know buy it….without think what we want to make…*.

CONCLUSION

Since paragraph is a small piece of writing and before the students write a more complex essay and other types of academic writing; it is essential to explain the organization of paragraph well in the beginning. They should be taught clearly about every component of a paragraph and do exercises with it. The process writing approach is possibly a great way to employ in teaching writing because it provides systematic steps for students to understand a writing process from generating ideas until producing a final paper. The students will have more opportunities to work on the process such as brainstorming, drafting, editing and so forth. Regarding the problem with the syntactic rule, teacher should show them the differences between English and Indonesian sentence structure. More drilling on sentence patterns and verb forms will help the students cope with the problem. Besides, the problem with L1 transfer will also be resolved. Moreover, intense practice on using cohesive devices in writing will also help them to write more coherently and cohesively. Providing feedback on their strength and weaknesses will also help the students improve their product of writing.

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