AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' FREE WRITING

Rahmi Fhonna
Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh

ABSTRACT

Writing contains a compound process to be expressed that entails the writer to pay more attention on linking appropriate words together. Most linguists agree that a writer should attain high level of understanding to pursue the lifelong learning of academic writing pedagogy. This study aimed to analyze the students' free writing by identifying the category of mistakes that often appear on their writing assignment. 28 free writings were collected, as the main data, from 28 students as the samples for this study. They were then analyzed by using the guidelines of correction symbols from Hogue (1996) and Oshima & Hogue (1999). The results revealed that 11 categories of grammar that often applied incorrectly on the students' free writing. The misused of verb-agreement (V/A) was the most frequent category occurred, followed by word form (Wf) and Spelling (Sp). The least category of errors identified on the students' free writing was conjunction (Conj) and wrong word (Ww) categories. Overall, 175 errors from different grammatical conventions were repeated in the students' free writing.

Keywords: Free writing, grammatical errors, writing implication

INTRODUCTION

Writing pedagogy is an essential practice to be taught at any level of education. It represents the students' ability in collaborating words to make meaning of the language used. With the insight that there is more necessary to understand the process of the writing itself than its product, most students often face some problems regarding this skill. Nunan (1999, p. 272) writes that the aspect of writing are the tension between process and product approaches to the teaching of writing, where

product-oriented approaches focus on the final product, the coherent, and error-free text, whereas process approaches stress on steps involved in drafting and redrafting a piece of work.

To enhance the students' attitude and understanding toward the writing approach, therefore, the role of lecturer is very important. To meet the need of succeeding teaching learning process, both variables such as students and lecturer, has to support each other in order to develop a constructive teaching learning circumstance. This is relevant to what Le and Tam (2007, p. 14) state that teaching encourages students to develop the deep approach to learning which has the following characteristics i) supports independent learning; ii) organizes appropriate learning activities; iii) encourages interaction with others; and iv) uses appropriate assessment practices that reward deep learning and informs students in advance of the required criteria and standards.

What is more, the students' writing in the tertiary context emphasises the way of conceptualising language as well as literacy which inscribed knowledge construction, the nature of generic academic, disciplinary specific and writing practices (Lilis, 2003, p.195). It is clear that students should acquire high level of understanding to pursue the lifelong learning of academic writing pedagogy. Shields (2010, p. 6) simply describes writing is one of a means of communication displayed in higher education, it must therefore conform to some shared standard and expectations, since the university codes and conventions for behaviour are to determine what is expected in academic writing.

This study, consequently, is an attempt to analyze the students' free writing by identifying the category of mistakes that often appear on their writing assignment. There is one question only to be answered in this study, which is what kind of the category of mistakes appears more often in the students' free writing?

The objective of this study is to identify the category of mistakes that often appear on the students' free writing. The participants of this study were 28 students in unit 2 of Department of English Eduation at Faculty of Tarbiyah and Education Studies of Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry. Both the researcher and the participants are familiar with each other since the researcher is the lecturer at this university. This was the reason for selecting them as the samples for this study. Another consideration for this was that about the convenience aspect while doing the research.

Review of literature

Many linguists have developed variant of approaches in relation to writing from decades to decades. This is because it requires an appropriate linguistic knowledge in resulting a qualified writing. Crinon and Marin (2010, p. 111) illustrate that writing includes a particular subject matter to convey the information, which is related to the vocabulary used, and how to organize it, as well as the familiarity with the appropriate genre and strategic understanding. Similarly, Oshima and Hogue (1999, p. 3) claim that writing is not an easy skill, yet it entails study and practice to increase this ability. They also note that writing is a process not a product, which means that a piece of writing is never complete; it is always possible to review and revise, and review and revise again.

In fact, writing is not only putting a piece of word down together on a paper (Kadesch, Dolba, & Crowell, 1991, p. 8), but also it requires a deeper understanding in relation to the language used. According to them, the writing process is usually divided into three steps: prewriting, drafting, and revising. Harmer (2007, p. 326), similarly, also claims that writing has a complex process containing a range of stages, such as drafting, reviewing, re-drafting and writing. These phases absolutely should be pertained well to acquire a qualified writing. In accordance with this point, Hedge (2000, p. 302) states that writing involves several activities, like setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing, revising and editing. These steps surely not easy for most second language writers. However, practice could make everything easier. Another process of writing is also described by Leonhard (2002, p. 40) who declares that there are 5 steps in the process of writing; brainstorming, organizing, writing, revising, proofreading and editing. All these processes should be organized well in order to produce a competent writing.

The difficulties of producing free writing

As one of the type of writings, free writing seems easier to be practiced. Indeed, it consists of a number of steps to be concerned to produce ideas that is very beneficial for writing. One of the hardest tasks in writing is getting started (Hedge, 2000, p. 308). What make the writing skill, in general, becomes more difficult to be

applied is that its components that should be seriously alert by the writer. Brown (2004, p. 218) believes that writing is a unique skill with its own features and conventions, and it is difficult to write 'well' in any languages, even in the writers' first language. This is also pertinent to what Nunan (1999, p. 272) asserts that the writer should be able to decide how to package information within a sentence and what grammatical forms to use, regarding tenses and clauses.

In order to produce a qualified free writing, the students should set the writing activity accurately. Planning and organizing ideas are the essential stages to be concerned on the topics preparatory. The students, then, are expected to engage the whole steps of writing by classifying the ideas based on the need of the writing itself. The teacher, as a consequence, has to assist the students to select the information required to fulfill the tasks as well as helping the students to get their ideas (Hedge, 2000, p. 308). At the end, the students are able to produce competent writing without hesitate after practicing more about the context of writing.

Research Methodology

This research focused on identifying the mistakes that commonly appear on students' free writing. The sample of this study was 28 students in their 2nd year study (fourth semester) of English Language Department at Faculty of Education and Pedagogy of Islamic State University Ar-Raniry. The researcher, moreover, collected the students' free writings which have been marked as the data required for this study. They were then calculated by using the certain formula.

The framework used in this research was adopted from a guideline of correction symbols from Hogue (1996) and Oshima & Hogue (1999). They categorize the mistakes by using certain figusre, which is much related to the grammatical errors, for instance spelling, verb/tense, and many others. The percentage of the whole mistakes found based on each category is then calculated. This is to identify the overall possible mistakes that may occur in the students' writings and also to rate which category of grammatical conventions that are often misused. Accordingly, this study also followed these procedures of analysis.

Data collection and Analysis

The researcher collected students' free writing assignments with the lecturers' comments on them, which was documented in both soft and hard copies. The mistakes made were recognized to find out the category of errors that appeared frequently. Each student's free writing contained at least 100 words.

In analyzing the students' writing, the researcher used a guideline of correction symbols, which is developed by Hogue (1996) and Oshima & Hogue (1999) that has been mentioned in section 3.1.2. The study focuses on finding the mistakes that commonly occur in the students' free writing. There were several different symbols and abbreviations in order to represent the mistakes occur on the students' free writing, for instance:

Cap = Capitalization   Vt = Verb tense

Agr = Agreement   Sp = Spelling

PL = Plural   UW = Unnecessary words

WF = Word form   WW = wrong words

Prep = Preposition   Conj = Conjunction

Art = Article

However, the researcher added and combined some abbreviations in this study to avoid the bias of the scoring system, such as Pro = Pronoun, Vt and Agr were joined together to be V/A = Verb agreement. Collocation was also added into category Prep (Preposition) for the scoring effectiveness.

The collected data, then, will be calculated by using the following formula as described by Anas (2008, p.43):

$$P = \frac{F}{N}x100\%$$

Description: P   = percentage

             F   = frequency

             N   = the number of sample

             100%   = constant value

DISCUSSION

This section describes the findings in relation to the mistakes identified in the students' free writing. 28 sheets of freewriting from different students were analyzed deeply by using the certain symbols and abbreviation, based on Hogue (1996) and Oshima & Hogue (1999) guidelines. The results are shown as in the following table:

Table 1: Number of errors in each category in each Sample

Student No.	V/A	PL	Pro	Wf	Art	Sp	Prep/c oll	Conj	Ww	Cap	Uw	Total errors
1									1		1	2
2	1		1			1	2					5
3	1	1	1		2	1	1	1				8
4	1		1			2						4
5	2	2		4							2	10
6				6							1	7
7	3	3									2	8
8	3							1	1			5
9	1											1
10	6				1	1	2			3		13
11	1	1										2
12	2			1								3
13	1	2				3				1		7
14					1	1				1	1	4
15	1			2								3
16		1			1		1			4		7
17	3	1		1		1				1	1	8
18	3	1		1	1	1	2				2	11
19	5			1		4						10
20	2										1	3
21	2			2							1	5
22	1			2		1	1					5
23	2			1								3
24		4			1	4	2				2	13
25	3	1		1							1	6
26	1			1		3	1				4	10
27	2	1										3
28	4	2		1	1		1					9
Totals (%)	51 (29, 1%)	20 (11, 4%)	3 (1, 7%)	24 (13, 7%)	8 (4, 6%)	23 (13, 1%)	13 (7, 4%)	2 (1, 1%)	2 (1, 1%)	10 (5, 7%)	19 (10, 8%)	**175**

According to the above table, the most common mistakes were identified in the free writing of Student No. 10 and 24 (S10 and S 24), which were about 13 errors in different categories. S18 formed 11 mistakes on her writing assignment while S5, S19 and S26 created 10 errors. However, the least mistake was found in S9 free writing, which was 1 error only. The rest of students also experienced the difficulties

in applying the grammatical conventions on their free writing, but the number of errors appeared less than 10.

In terms of the category of mistakes that frequently emerged on the students' free writing, verb-agreement (V/A) was the most common one with the total of 51 (29,1%). Wf and Sp were the other categories that were mostly used wrongly by the students with the total of 24 and 23 consecutively. PL and Uw occurred 20 and 19 times each in the total of the students' free writing. Nevertheless, conj and WW categories were the least mistakes appeared on the students' free writing with the total of 2 each. Pronoun (pro) was another type of errors that was found less than others with the total of 3. Prep/coll category occurred 13 times of the total in the students' free writing. The misused of Capitalization (Cap) and Articles (Art) were also detected with the total of 10 and 8 each.

From the table, it can be seen that the misused of V/A can be found mostly on S10 free writing with the total of 6 times, which was followed by S15 and S28 with the total of 5 and 4 each. PL was found mostly on S24 writing assignment with a total of 4 errors. Pro was the category that was misused by 3 students; S2, S3 and S4, with the total of 1 mistake each. S6 had a difficulty in utilizing Wf category on her free writing since the mistake appeared 6 times repeatedly. Compared to the other students' writing, S3 made the most mistakes regarding the use of Article on her free writing with the total of 3 errors. S19 and S24 applied Sp category carelessly that the errors found 4 times each on their assignments.

The number of misused of Prep/coll, additionally, was almost the same among students, where there was 1 or 2 errors found regarding this category on their writing. These mistakes can be seen on S2, S3, S10, S16, S18, S22, S24, S26, and S28 free writing. Surprisingly, the category of Conj and WW were the least mistakes discovered on the students' writing. S3 and S8 had 1 error each for Conj, meanwhile S1 and S8 also made 1 mistake each for WW. On the other hand, the most common mistake indicated in S16 writing was Cap, with the total of 4 errors. The last category, which was UW, was appeared frequently on S26 free writing assignment with the total of 4 errors as well.

The Results

It is clear that this study aims to identify the category of mistakes that often appear on the students' free writing. The results show that the students experienced some difficulties in applying various rules of grammatical conventions. It is assumed that these difficulties were resulted from their familiarity with the writing activity. It is believed that the more they practiced the more they experienced. This is relevant to what Hedge (2000, p. 167) states that practice can contribute to implicit grammatical knowledge and it allows learners to be familiar with the rules involved as well as developing the learners' ability to use a rule accurately and automatically in production.

What is more, the results also demonstrated that there were 11 categories of mistakes that occurred frequently on the students' free writing. V/A was the category that often misused by the students, followed by Wf and Sp. These categories, essentially, are the vital aspect in writing since they characterize the language used and symbolize the writers' ability in mastering the writing skill. The students, therefore, should pay more attention in applying these categories into writing in order to avoid misunderstanding.

PL and Uw were other categories that regularly appeared on students' free writing. This indicates that the students' first language influence their writing immensely. It cannot be denied that the students face serious problems to produce a qualified writing in their first language, and it is worsen when they have to write in the second even in the third language, as writing is a process which requires specific knowledge for specific field of study (Schleppegrell, 2004, as cited in Ravelli & Ellis, 2004, p.173; Gilmore, 2009, p. 363). The students, thus, should be aware of using this category of grammar.

In addition, the writing will be more advantageous when the students can insert the other categories of grammar perfectly, such as the use of capitalization, Preposition/collocation, pronoun, conjunction and articles. Although these categories seem easy, they are tricky and trapped. Likewise, the choice of words is also important to construct a good writing. Even though this category (Ww) of mistake was one of the

least common emerged on the students' writing, it signified the students' vocabulary mastery.

CONCLUSION

Based on the investigation, it can be concluded that the students experienced various problems in using the grammar conventions on their writing. Numerous categories were used improperly, for instance V/A (Verb-agreement), spelling, plurals, articles, capitalization, conjunction, preposition/collocation, and pronoun. With respect to vocabulary used, some students also find it difficult to select the appropriate words, which resulted in producing poor writing.

The category of V/A was the most common mistakes found on the students' writing, followed by Wf and Sp. Conj and Ww, nevertheless, were the least category of errors identified on the students' free writing.

As this study is limited, it is expected that future studies should investigate deeper analysis of students' writing. The research should involve a wider number of participants and scope to gain better understanding on the students' writing problem. It is also suggested to link the research about writing with the lecturers' feedback in order to acquire two ways analysis of the writing activity.

REFERENCES

Anas, S. (2008). *Pengantar Statistika Pendidikan.* Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada.

Brown, H. D. (2004). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices.* New York: Longman.

Crinon, J., & Marin, B. (2010). The role of peer feedback in learning to write explanatory texts: why the tutors learn the most. *Language Awareness, 19 (2):* 111-128.

Gilmore, A. (2009). Using online corpora to develop students' writing skills. *ELT journal, 63 (4):* 363-370.

Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching (4th Eds).* Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom.* Oxford: Oxford University press.

Hogue, A. (1996). *First steps in academic writing.* New York: Longman.

Kadesch, M. C., Kolba, E. D., & Crowell, S. C. (1991). *Insights into academic writing: Strategies for advanced students.* New York: Longman.

Le, K. N., & Tam, V. W. Y. (2001). A survey on effective assessment methods to enhance student learning. *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education, 13 (2):* 13-20.

Leonhard, B. H. (2002). *Discoveries in academic writing.* Singapore: Heinle & Heinle.

Lilis, T. (2003). Student Writing as 'Academic Literacies': Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from *Critique* to *Design. Language and Education, 17 (3):* 192-207.

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning.* Florence, KY: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Oshima, A., & Hogue, N. (1999). *Writing Academic English (3rd Eds).* New York: Longman.

Schleppegrell, M. J. (2004). Technical writing in a second language: The role of grammatical metaphor. In Ravelli, L. J., & Ellis, R. A. (Eds). *Analyzing academic writing: contextualized framework.* 172-189. London: Continuum.

Shields, M. (2010). *Essay writing: A student's guide.* London: SAGE Publications.