

NARRATIVE PARAGRAPH COMPOSITION: A DESCRIPTION OF EFL LEARNERS' PROFICIENCY IN USING PAST TENSE

Rusmiati

Department of English Education, Tarbiyah Faculty, IAIN Takengon, Aceh
E-mail: rusmiatiza19@gmail.com

Abstract

It is unavoidable that writing becomes a compulsory subject in English Department as it is one of the notable skills that ought to be acquired by English language learners. They are demanded to possess a better writing proficiency after taking certain writing subjects. Nonetheless, writing is perceived as the most troublesome English language learning capability since it constitutes a productive skill. To specify, expressing ideas and using grammatically correct language are considered quite challenging for students. This study, accordingly, was carried out to investigate the learners' writing production to find out their expertise in composing a past narrative paragraph in particular. Therefore, fourteen compositions of the second-semester students in the academic year 2018/2019 were employed in this investigation. The findings show that most of them composed narrative paragraphs precisely, i.e., by applying chronological development or time order. That notwithstanding, the majority of them used verb tense incorrectly in their past narrative composition.

Keywords: *EFL Learners, Proficiency, Narrative Paragraph*

Abstrak

Tidak dapat dihindari bahwa menulis merupakan sebuah mata kuliah wajib pada Jurusan Bahasa Inggris karena menulis adalah keahlian penting yang harus dicapai oleh mahasiswa/pelajar pada Jurusan Bahasa Inggris. Mereka dituntut untuk memiliki kemampuan menulis yang lebih baik setelah mengambil mata kuliah menulis. Bagaimanapun, menulis dianggap sebagai kemampuan yang sulit dalam bahasa Inggris karena merupakan keahlian yang produktif. Lebih jelasnya, mengeluarkan ide dan menggunakan bahasa yang benar secara grammar dianggap sebagai tantangan bagi pelajar. Oleh karena itu, kajian ini dilakukan untuk menginvestigasi hasil tulisan pelajar untuk menemukan/memperoleh gambaran tentang kemampuan mereka dalam menulis khususnya paragraph naratif. Jadi, empat belas tulisan dari mahasiswa semester 2 pada tahun ajaran 2018/2019 digunakan dalam studi ini. Penemuan menunjukkan bahwa kebanyakan dari mereka menulis paragraph secara tepat, yaitu dengan menerapkan perkembangan secara kronologi atau sesuai waktu. Akan tetapi, kebanyakan dari mereka menulis kata kerja yang tidak sesuai pada karangan paragraph naratif.

Kata Kunci: *Pelajar EFL, Kecakapan, Paragraf Naratif*

Writing is an essential skill that has to be concerned by English language learners. Many 4-year undergraduate English programs in Aceh provide writing courses from 1 to 4 as compulsory subjects. Passing one writing course is the requisite for another higher-level writing course. Hence, learners need to pay attention to passing the writing course to succeed. Failing in one writing course causes the learners to be unable to take the next higher level of the writing course, possibly hindering them from graduating at an appropriate time.

By writing, the writers can communicate with the readers indirectly. They do not meet face to face in conveying the information as it is performed in the other productive skill, speaking. Therefore, they cannot see each other and do not have an opportunity to notice the interlocutors' expressions. Writing requires well-written language to deliver the information appropriately to the readers. Dooley (1995) stated, "Every text is in line with the context so that the text can deliver the meaning and messages to the readers."

Nevertheless, writing was complicated for English language learners (Kusumawardhani, 2017; Saadat and Alavi, 2018, Rifaat, 2019; Anggraini and Lume, 2021; Kusumawardhani, 2017), yet it could be characteristics for future success in the academic field (Saadat and Alvi, 2018). It even become challenging despite for advanced learners (Grami, 2012). As stated, learning how to write in a second language is one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning (Richards, 2003). This fact could be in consequence of several concerns that should be mastered by the language learners and emerge when expressing ideas in their writing. By writing, students are assisted to reinforce the grammatical structure, idioms, and vocabularies that have been taught, have an adventure with language, go beyond what they have learned to say, and become involved in the new language (Sattayatham and Pongrat, 2008). In addition, Burnaby (1984) also pointed out that writing is a highly cognitive activity that needs control of many variables simultaneously. However, writing is

not only challenging to study but also to teach (Kusumawardhani, 2018).

According to Nunan (2003), writing is one of the productive skills. The writers can express their feeling or circumstances that the readers can read and enjoy (Alawi, F.F., 2011). This skill requires EFL learners to think about the ideas to write actively. The learners need to describe a situation, a feeling, or an experience so that the readers can catch the writers' point.

In addition, Ruetten and Smalley (1995, p. 6-14) argued that writers go through the process of writing by undertaking a general sequence of stages, namely prewriting, drafting, and revising. In the first stage, writers use their time to think about the idea or topic they want to focus on to write. Some techniques can be applied in generating ideas, i.e., brainstorming, freewriting, WH-Questions, and clustering. The second stage, drafting, is the actual writing where the ideas generated at the first stage have been opted and are ready to put in a paragraph or an essay. It is time to revise the existing writing in the last stage, broken down into two parts: revising and editing. Revising means looking at the content or organization for the second time to assure that they are good enough. At the same time, editing serves to change sentences or words into a better version.

Furthermore, a paragraph is a fundamental part of writing, comprising some sentences that develop one idea. It embodies three important things to present good information to the readers, i.e., a topic sentence, several supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. A topic sentence must include the paragraph's main idea consisting of two elements, namely topic and controlling idea. Controlling idea functions to limit the topic discussed in a paragraph. While supporting sentences serve to explain what is stated in the topic sentence. Some paragraphs also contain a concluding sentence that sums up the idea in a paragraph (Oshima and Hogue, 1998, p. 17). Boardman and Frydenberg (2008, p.9) state that the concluding sentence is a restatement of the topic sentence or a summary of the main points described in the body of the paragraph.

Concerning what a narrative paragraph means, many experts define it in the same way. Ann Hogue (2003: 286) stated that we also use time order to write about an event or series of events such as a wedding, a birthday celebration, a vacation, a frightening experience, a happy occasion, a person's life story, and many more. This kind of paragraph is called a narration or a narrative paragraph. Smalley and Ruetten (1995: 51) added that ordering your sentences and ideas in order of time is called chronological development.

Similarly, Boardman and Frydenberg (2008: 18) argued that good chronological ordering of sentences must be used in a narrative paragraph meaning that the supporting sentences tell the events of a story in the order that they happened. In other words, the events must be ordered according to the time. In addition, Oshima and Hogue (1999:57) also said that chronological order organizes the ideas in a paragraph in the order of their occurrence in time. Above all, it can be concluded that a narrative paragraph means telling a story or experience or a series of events in which they take place according to the time. To specify, it tells what happens first, second, third, et cetera.

In relation to grammar, especially its influence on learners' composition, a researcher (Braganza, 1998) emphasized the necessity of grammar in writing. He argued that violating the essential rules of grammar can adversely affect the propositional content, which will affect the writer's credibility. In addition, Weigle (2002) supported this issue, stating that L2 (second language) students cannot write in a second language correctly without linguistic knowledge regarding grammar and vocabulary. In a nutshell, it can be stated that grammar is an indispensable matter which the students must carry in learning writing.

In addition, some definitions concerning grammar have been stated by experts. Regardless, there is no fixed definition that is universally accepted. Richards and Schmidt (2002) said that grammar is the structure of a language in which words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in a language.

In contrast, Harmer (2001:12) defines grammar as the description of how words can change their forms and be combined into sentences in the language. In other words, it can be said that grammar is a series of rules (a system) of how to arrange words or phrases in a language to form a sentence so that the interlocutors understand what is uttered.

Regarding tenses in English, it is used based on addressing an action happening at a specific time. For instance, past tense is used to indicate that an action occurred in the past. Thus, this sort of tense is required to apply when writing a paragraph telling experiences which exist in the past. The purpose of grammatical error correction is to improve students' accuracy. (Nirwana, Iye, and Tahir, 2020). Grammar knowledge contributes to the learners writing proficiency. A research result showed that EFL writing proficiency was closely related to linguistic knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, and spelling) and linguistic fluency (Schoonen, R. et al. 2011). Besides, the learners' productive collocation knowledge could also affect writing proficiency when it is produced grammatically correct (Lee, Shinwoong, 2015).

Nonetheless, it is known that in bahasa, the pattern of forming verbs in sentences of past form cannot be found in English. This distinction could probably disrupt the learners in writing a sentence since they have to adjust to a new language system when writing in other languages. Hence, it is fundamental to see their consistency in writing past form.

Each language has its system to become a way of communication among its users. The system of a language could be similar to or different from that of another language. A wide range of these similarities or discrepancies can impact the learners of a language. When their target language is similar to their native, it is likely more manageable for them to master the language and vice versa. It is because students often transfer the system of their mother tongue (L1) into the target language (L2) (Bustami, 2004).

Furthermore, this study is carried out to investigate the EFL learners' capability in producing a paragraph. It focuses on the past narrative paragraph used to analyze the learners' appropriateness in making the composition, which employs the chronological order development, also called time order. Moreover, as it is a paragraph telling an experience or story, then it is vital to investigate the learners' consistency in using past tense verbs in their composition. Therefore, their writing proficiency was explored by answering the following research questions: 1. Do the learners produce the assigned past narrative paragraph by following its chronological order? And 2. Do they use the appropriate verb tense in composing past narrative paragraphs?

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach. Lodico et al. (2006) noted that qualitative study aims to discover meaning, investigate the processes, and gain an in-depth understanding of an individual, group, or situation. Similarly, Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) also pointed out that as the data are collected in the form of words rather than numerical scores, and the natural setting is the direct data, the qualitative is the most appropriate approach be used in this study. The purpose of this investigation is to describe the learners' competency in writing; consequently, this sort of methodology is proper to be employed.

Respondents

The subject of this research is 14 English language students of the second semester in the academic year 2018/2019 who are enrolled in a writing course named Writing II. A past narrative paragraph is one of the selected materials taught to the students in this course.

Instruments

This study uses a test as the instrument in collecting the data. The final examination is the most appropriate test to use in this study since that is the last test the learners take after following the materials taught by the lecturer. At this stage, the learners are considered to

have a better understanding because they have gone through a series of practices in writing either in the classroom or as assignment outside the classroom. The data used in this investigation, thus, is fourteen pieces of students' works on composing a past narrative paragraph.

Data Analysis

Those data are subsequently analyzed by using the following steps. First, the students' compositions are checked out one at a time to discover whether they have been composed in its ordering principle, which is time order in this case. Afterward, the use of verb tense, specifically past tense in this study, is also significant to be examined because past narrative paragraph constitutes telling a story or experience that happened and finished in the past.

Aims

Those steps are undertaken to come across the answer to the proposed research questions in this study. They are 1. Do the learners produce the assigned past narrative paragraph by following its chronological order? And 2. Do they use the appropriate verb tense in composing past narrative paragraphs?

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the learners' answer sheets, it can be described their ability in writing. Many aspects can be assessed, such as the idea, how the ideas are arranged (principle), word choice or vocabulary use, verb tense, and many other grammatical concerns from those compositions. Nevertheless, this study only focuses on two things. First, how the ideas are arranged (principle), which is the chronological development or time order, is the supposed principle the learners perform in composing a narrative paragraph. The second focus in this research is the verb tense used in telling stories that occurred in the past. Moreover, in this case, past tense is the appropriate form to be applied. Hence, the errors other than these two focuses which are found in the learners' compositions will not be discussed in this analysis.

1. Learners' Proficiency in Writing Narrative Paragraph (Applying for Chronological Order)

To begin with, the following piece of a learner's composition demonstrates his proficiency in writing past narrative paragraph:

Student A

My unforgettable experiences is when I went to a waterfall. Last month my family and I went to a beautiful waterfall in a village called Mengaya. On the way we saw a beautiful lake with many fisherman who wanted to caught fish. After walked for several hours we arrived in a gate to the waterfall. On the way from the gate I saw many flower next to the way. I saw some people picked up coffee and we stop for a moment to saw fruits of coffee. After that we continued the journey to the waterfall. When we arrived at the waterfall first thing that I said is "this is awesome" the water flowed from the waterfall make like a little pools and multistoried. In short went to the waterfall in mengaya village is very unforgettable moments for me because all of thing that I saw, flower, lake, coffee, and many others I can't found it in the city. (A paragraph telling the writer's experience composed by a second semester student of English Department)

From the paragraph, it can be noticed that the learner composed a narrative paragraph in its principle of chronological development in which the events are put in time order. It obviously tells the reader what the writer and his family did first, second, et cetera in his telling the experience. In brief, it is true to say that the student is able to write a past narrative paragraph properly, that is by using time order principle.

To portrait further, the subsequent piece of composition is another example illustrating a learner's ability in writing past narrative paragraph:

Student B

My first day of examination is so bad, in the morning I'm late wake up from my sleep about it I must wait my turn for take bath. after that I wearing my uniform, my uniform is white and black. when I want to wearing my

skirt, my skirt is wet and I borrow skirt from my friend. So when on the journey to campus, the road is crowded. It's make me wait time long on the journey to campus because the road is repair. After that when I'm arrive at campus the examination is began. About it I don't examination in my First lesson, it's writting lesson. when the second lesson my Pen is lost. I'm Forgot where I Put it. In conclusion, I don't like my first day Of my examination, because my First day OF examination is Ugly. (A paragraph telling the writer's experience composed by a second semester student of English Department)

It can be seen that the writer of this composition also applied time order principle in developing her paragraph. The transition signals used by the writer such as "after that" and "when" signify this development. The application of this principle makes the writing easy to follow by the readers and thus, the information or message expressed by the writer is delivered appropriately to the readers. It can be concluded that this student also employed the correct principle in writing narrative paragraph, namely chronological or time order.

Furthermore, the other pieces of writing have also been analysed in the same way as the two aforementioned selected paragraphs. The result reveals that 8 out of 14 students have applied the supposed principle in composing a narrative paragraph appropriately, that is chronological development or time order. Thus, it can be said that most of the learners used the correct principle, time order, in writing past narrative paragraph.

From the above finding, it can be concluded that a good narrative paragraph with its chronological development resulting in the readers' attainability of the writers' idea can be reached by the learners. This provides the answer for the first research question, that is most of the students do compose the past narrative paragraph in its chronological development or time order.

2. Learners' Ability in Utilizing Appropriate Verb Tense in Writing Past Narrative Paragraph

Regarding using the correct tense in writing, the writer (Student A) also successfully employed past tense verbs in composing the paragraph when telling his actions in the past. It indicates that the learner conceives past forms in writing a past narrative paragraph. Nonetheless, there are a few incorrect usages of verb tense: the word "stop" in line 5 should be "stopped" since it tells the event in the past. Another mistake is that the phrase "can't found" in the last line should be "couldn't find" instead. All in all, it can be concluded that the writer of this paragraph understands the use of the correct tense in telling experience, although he committed a few mistakes in it.

On the contrary, the composition of Student B seems to have a severe problem with the verb tense use. It can be noticed that none of the verbs was used correctly in the past tense. Only two forms of past were found in this paragraph and at the same time, however, were misused: "I am forgot" in line 7 should be "I forgot", whereas "the examination began" is preferred instead of "the examination begins" in line 6. While the rest of the verbs, the majority, were primarily found in base forms (present tense verb). In other words, this student did not use the expected verb tense in her composition.

Furthermore, other writing pieces were also investigated and analyzed in the same way to see the accuracy in using verb tense. However, only fifty percent of the learners did use the appropriate tense, i.e., past tense, in composing the paragraph, although it was also often misused, and other tenses were still detected in their composition. In contrast, the other half of the learners did not use the correct tense at all in writing their past experiences. Consequently, it can be summed up that the learners' competence, by and large, can be considered "poor" in applying past tense in composing a past narrative paragraph.

As the answer to the second research question, most of the students misuse verb tenses in their past narrative composition.

Like the aforesaid explanation in the introduction, the wrongly used language structure in the learners' composition disrupts the achievement of their writing efficacy. Therefore, it is indispensable to overcome this issue in the future. This finding is in line with Watcharapunyawong's (2012) research. He found that verb tense is the most frequent error made by the second-year English major students at Thepsatri Rajabhat University, Thailand in narrative writing. The finding of this study is also similar to what Jannah (2015) found in her study that the second-semester students of the English Department of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung could not consistently in using past tense to develop their narrative text.

Interestingly, a problem with learners' language learning is discovered in this investigation, namely the lack of knowledge in using the past tense. The majority of the learners do not use past form when telling events in the past. Moreover, even when they use past tense, it is often misused. As discussed previously regarding language transfer, the use of different verb forms in different tenses is not found in the learners' native language. Thus, this error can probably result from the different systems of the two languages. This issue, however, is not discussed in depth in this study and can be a suggestion for the subsequent investigation.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The present study reveals that most learners have used the correct principle in composing their experience. Applying time order in writing some actions in a narrative story makes the readers quickly catch the writer's idea. Although the learners have applied the proper principle in writing, their capability in using past tense in their narrative paragraph is regarded as poor. Too many verbs which should be in past tense were written incorrectly, which eventually indicates the low writing proficiency of the learners. As a result, it is suggested that the learners should more frequently deepen their understanding in applying past tense to improve their proficiency in writing. The lecturer should

also highlight the use of past tense to the learners in language learning.

Concerning the inappropriate use of past tense in writing a past narrative paragraph, a further investigation of past tense usage mistakes in this study is conceived necessary to conduct. It is probably to reveal types and sources of errors committed by the learners and perhaps the hardship they confront in learning writing or language structure.

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