

Identifying students' difficulties in essay writing course

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the students' difficulties in the essay writing course. The subjects of this study were fifth semester students of English Education Department academic year 2019/2020 in IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo, totalling 5 students. The method used in this study was qualitative with descriptive design. Data was collected through observation sheets, interviews, and documentation. Analysis data was done through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions drawing. The results showed that there were four difficulties in the essay writing course, namely lack of vocabulary, lack of grammar mastery, lack of organization, and mechanics mastery in writing. It is implied from this research that lecturers must pay attention to students' vocabulary mastery and grammatical skills.

Keywords: lack of vocabulary, lack of grammar mastery, organization and mechanics mastery

INTRODUCTION

Writing means arranging words into a sentence or a writing that is interesting and easily understood by readers. Writing is also an alternative used to express ideas, feelings, opinions, to provide information, and to express something that is in the minds of students. Kern in Thohid (2014) explains that the benefits of writing for English as a foreign language learner are to develop the ability of learners to construct ideas, thoughts, and feelings, and to enhance their communicative ability and sensitivity to the relationship between forms and meanings in English texts, allowing more time to process the language than the time given when they are dealing with the speaking section and allowing them to express their imaginative world, which sometimes cannot be expressed orally. However, to make good writing is not easy, but also not as difficult as we think. It simply requires concentration, seriousness, and more attention in

writing skills. Harmer in Annisa (2016) stated that students should pay attention not only in what to write but also in how to write.

Although several stages in composing a correct writing have been taught, it is still difficult for students to make a correct writing. This is appeared when the researchers did pre-observation and the results indicated that there was lack of vocabulary mastered by the students. Therefore, student was feeling confused in the use of vocabulary. Besides, they also felt difficulty in grammar. It can be seen from their final results or grades given by the lecturer. Most of the students still got unsatisfactory grades, while only a small proportion who got enough grades, and even to get a perfect score is impossible in writing for academic purposes subject. Thus, based on the problem, the researchers were interested to identify factors that cause the difficulties of students in composing a correct writing in wish that students can find out the errors in writing and compose writing correctly and appropriately accepted.

Additionally, practice is important in terms of writing. But before doing writing activity, students have to know in advance the aspects that need to be considered in making a good writing. The aspects such as the selection of vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and other aspects that support good writing results, and that is why writing is more difficult than other skills.

Academic writing is a kind of an important writing type in academic field. Academic writing is a type of writing that is specifically used for academic purposes. At this academic writing stage, students learn the format in correct writing and in accordance with academic requirements, on this occasion academic writing such as paper, journal, thesis, proposal, and in composing the text the accuracy of sentences is needed to achieve perfection in writing. Academic writing plays a very important role in the acquisition of a foreign language. It encompasses a number of essential elements, such as critical thinking and self-expression. In addition, techniques involving paraphrasing and summarizing cannot be overlooked in academic writing.

Producing perfect writing is indeed difficult, and does not rule out the possibility even though the basic stages of writing have been learned. Students still find it difficult to make a good writing, thinking and understanding something is easy but practicing something is not as easy as thought.

METHODS

Researchers used qualitative method to describe and explain the facts that occur in the field. Qualitative research's quality criteria are determined by the credibility of the researcher, which includes sufficient knowledge, experience, and understanding of deep context. The researchers used qualitative method to collect data and to gain more complete data, where the researchers apply some stages such as observation, interviews, and documentation. Then, participants of this research were 5th semester students of English Education Department IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo. Analysis of data was carried out through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions drawing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

After analyzing data, it was found that the students should master some writing aspects namely Content, Organization, Vocabulary, and Grammar. Unfortunately, there was only one aspect that is mastered by most students, namely the content. Meanwhile, three of them were still difficult to be mastered, those are:

1. Vocabulary

Most students of English education at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo in 5th semester encountered difficulties in vocabulary. They said that their vocabulary was not enough to compose essay writing text. It can be seen from the results of the writing that has been made where they often use repeated words, and also in writing essays the students did not just use or pay attention to the usual vocabulary or commonly used but have been suggested to use academic vocabulary.

Besides, there are some errors that generally occurred, for example: “So *that's why mobile phone is very important*” and “*Whether it's a positive impact and negative*”. Based on the example, there are two words “*what's* and “*it's*” in the sentences which indicate abbreviation that are not allowed in scientific writing. In contrast, in writing essays they must master vocabulary at the academic level which has been a limiting factor for students that they were still lack in academic vocabulary mastery. They only memorized every vocabulary that is considered necessary. Then, they did not find out what the academic vocabulary is like. It finally made them feel confused with kinds of academic vocabulary example.

a. *Diction*

Diction is the appropriate selection of words. The choice of words that are often used in writing activity must be well selected and students must pay attention on it because the placement of vocabulary determines the meaning of a sentence, and in order to do so it must be arranged well and it requires accuracy. However, in this diction the students are often inconsistent in the choice of words. The following are the findings of student assignments, for example: “*Handphone is very important tool..... Cellphone here not only as a communication tool...*” Based on the example, it can be seen that in the use of word “*Handphone*” turns into “*Cellphone*” when it is in the next explanation or sentences. So, they have difficulty in choosing words or are inconsistent in the words used in sentences.

b. *Difficult to choose vocabulary*

The last one is they are difficult to choose vocabulary, this is caused by they still feel confused in using vocabulary, for example in the placement of cardinal and ordinal numbers (three or third), “*Three times in a day,*” and “*third times for this year*”. In choosing or placing into these two sentences they feel confusion that they are still not sure about the vocabulary they use in writing the essay. They fear of using vocabulary that is deemed appropriate but still get correction from the lecturer. They still need a dictionary, but still have doubts about the vocabulary selection.

2. *Grammar*

a. *Difficulties in using linking words*

Linking words are indeed very important in writing essays, because these are things that must be considered and can make writing look good and interesting to read. There are so many linking words contained in writing activities but the following are commonly used linking words that are: addition (that stating the addition of information) for example ‘in addition, and, as well as, moreover, not only-but also, furthermore, besides’; contrast (that is to express the opposite) for example ‘even though, although, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, but, conversely, whereas, in spite of/despite’; cause and effect (that is stating cause and effect) for example ‘therefore, for this reason, because, because of this, due to, owing to, as a consequence, for, since’; purpose (for stating the purpose) for example ‘therefore, for this reason, because, because of this, due to, owing to, as a consequence, for, since’; summarize (to infer an idea) for example ‘in brief, to conclude, in short, in conclusion’.

The problem in using linking words is also experienced by students. Even though they are English students, they still find difficulties to understand linking words. They still feel confused in using linking words and are lack of understanding with the intention of the words in sentences and they feel that too many things must be understood in linking words.

b. Ignoring the structure of writing

The structure of writing is very important to understand its meaning because in order to make good writing results the students must pay more attention to the accuracy of the writing structure. That must be in accordance with the procedure so that readers can easily understand the purpose and objectives of the essay and that readers can see from the author's point of view. Besides, in writing activities the writer should be curious and pay attention to the results of his writing and re-read the results of his writings. From the interview results, it is found that the writing structure is often ignored by students. They write according to what they think is appropriate to put in the essay without considering the level of accuracy of the words.

c. Difficult to use preposition

Preposition has its own level of difficulty in each study, there are several types of prepositions, namely: a) Preposition of Time: In, On, At, Before, After, For, Since. b) Preposition of Place and Direction: In, On, At, Under, Between, Among, Beside, Next to. c) Preposition of Agent or Instrument: By, With, Without. In circumstances where a lot of attention must be paid to its use, this can make students feel confused and difficult to put between sentences and what they often hear and use just 'in, on and at' without knowing when to use it and not all of these prepositions are understood by the students. Their difficulty in using prepositions as well can be proven by the results of the interview. According to participant, using prepositions is still very confusing, lack of understanding of the preposition because there are many parts as well.

3. Organization and mechanic

a. Determine the title of the theme

Determining the title of a predetermined theme certainly looks very easy to do, but it is not like what is thought by most people. It is because in determining the title of the theme has been experienced and practiced by English students and they still feel difficulties in this regard. This can be proven by the results of interviews. According to them, they still need more time to make the title in accordance with what they think is correct and acceptable. In addition, they

are feeling confused when giving a theme without explaining in more detail what has been given.

b. Difficult in determining the contents

The difficulty in making the contents of the text is indeed a difficult thing, in making content it must be patterned, that is from specific to general or from general to specific but this is also a challenge for students and is also a difficulty faced by them. It is also because in this content the writer must be able to present the reader with sentences or explanations that are clear and easy to understand. Likewise, what was experienced directly by the students are difficulties where they needed sufficient time to make the content. In addition, they are difficult in choosing the right sentence because the content requires sentences that can spoil and understand the reader. The students managed to compose a writing which according to them was all correct but still gets many correction from the lecturer.

Discussion

Writing activity is indeed not an easy thing to do even though the ability to write is used as a parameter of the ability of a student or individual who studies at a high level and the ability to write is still used today. The difficulty that is often experienced also has the own difficulties that is almost the same as the findings that have been encountered by several previous researchers, where similar problems often occur and the solution can be similar depending on the case encountered in the field.

Cases or problems of writing difficulties that are usually encountered in writing activities according to Al-Khairiy (2013) are generally mistakes made by students were that they did not master grammar. Even though grammar was a matter of great concern in writing activities, especially in writing essays, then the next mistake was the accuracy in choosing the vocabulary to be used and using irregular verbs even though in writing essays as writers should pay more attention to the vocabulary that will be used. It is because the level of vocabulary that must be used in essay writing is academic vocabulary which is not an arbitrary word or commonly used in speaking activities.

Furthermore, many students experience errors in the use of punctuation and spelling. It can be seen that the students' difficult aspects that are found in the students' writing are grammatical errors, the inappropriate choice of vocabulary, and incorrect spelling. In addition, the researchers also found another factors that cause the level of difficulty in writing activities

namely lack of vocabulary, difficulties in expressing ideas, and difficulties in using linking words.

Lack of vocabulary was a difficulty that the researchers found in the field, this was also stated by Sulasti in Pratiwi (2016) that the problems they mostly face are how to write, what to write, lack of vocabulary, and lack of structure. Lack of grammar and linking words included in grammar and also have an important role in writing, but there are still many students who still have difficulty in using linking words. It can be proven by interviews obtained that there are three reasons why students have difficulties in writing, they are: (1) students' lack mastery of vocabulary so that they are unable to express their ideas in appropriate English words; (2) students' lack mastery of grammar that they are unable to write grammatical sentences; (3) students' lack motivation to learn writing that they have bad performance in writing. Therefore, it will be very effective in writing to pay more attention to linking words and to better understand the linking words is to practice using it more and read more about it.

CONCLUSIONS

From the results obtained by researchers it can be concluded the problems or difficulties faced by students in writing are various and the difficulties often faced by students are recurring difficulties in each era, in which laziness, fear, lack of confidence and the environment is also contributing factors in student's failure to achieve what he desires. In addition, thoughts about fear of making mistake is also always in the mind of students. Here are some factors that researchers found in the field are: a) Lack of vocabulary, academic vocabulary, diction and difficult to choose vocabulary; b) Difficult in grammar includes difficulty in using linking words, preposition, and always ignoring the structure of writing; c) Difficult in organization consist of difficulty in determining the title of the specified theme, difficulty to determine the contents; d) Difficult in mechanic that is spelling problems in sentences. The researcher has suggested to students to be more focused and serious in participating in learning essay writing because making essays is not as easy as thought, and more expanding and broadening insight, and also learn more about information related to writing essays. For lecturers, it is suggested to give more assignments or practices to students in order to improve students' ability to think and expand vocabulary and make it easier for students to compose a writing. Finally, for further researcher it is suggested to pay more attention to the difficulty that are often experienced by students and make things difficult becomes easier through the implementation of certain methods or strategies in learning.

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