NEEDS ANALYSIS OF INDONESIAN FRESHMEN’S WRITING AT UNIVERSITY OF INDONESIA: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Istianah Ramadani
Lembaga Bahasa Internasional FIB UI

Abstract: Indonesian university students have limited background knowledge about writing in English. They do not have enough exposure to writing when they are in high school, since the focus in the high school curriculum is on the receptive skills – listening and reading. Writing is limited to producing loose sentences, while the skill to develop ideas is not developed. These limitations hamper their writing skills in higher education and cause problems when they study English for Academic Purposes at the university. This study focuses on the inadequate writing skills of freshmen at the University of Indonesia and what should ideally be done to address the issues. In an attempt to analyze what students need to develop ideas as well as writing skills, an analysis toward their writing has been done. To further find information about their writing background, a sixteen-item questionnaire was completed by 50 students at the University of Indonesia. The study concludes that students need to be facilitated more to write since they are in high school.

Keywords: writing process, practice, exposure

As English is an international language, a lot of people need to learn it. Usually teachers focus more on teaching spoken language as well as reading and put little emphasis on teaching writing. They argue that teaching writing consumes time and can be problematic especially for disorganized students. Writing becomes the last skill they teach because it is a challenging and complex skill. According to Harmer (2004), spoken language is acquired naturally as a result of being exposed to it, whereas the ability to write has to be consciously learned. Because of those reasons, some teachers legitimate not to teach writing. However, given as a global language, more people need to learn to write in English to support their occupation or study. Therefore, writing has become a much more important subject to be taught in the second or foreign language curriculum (Leki, 1994 in Lestari, 2008).

At the University of Indonesia, students are required to take English for Academic Purposes in their first year of study. In this course, to improve their writing skills, they have to write several compositions such as paragraphs and essays. Unfortunately, they meet difficulties when they write. The challenges are not only in grammar but also in organizing and developing ideas and in maintaining paragraph unity. These students feel insecure and are unwilling to write because they think they are unable to complete writing tasks successfully. Thus, the results of their writing assignments are not satisfactory.

It is a fact that writing is a difficult skill even in their first language. Harmer (2004) said that teaching writing was about helping students to communicate real messages in an appropriate manner; therefore, training students to write demands the care and attention of language teachers. He continued saying that being able to write was a vital skill for ‘speakers’ of a foreign language. Considering those situations, students need to get more writing exposures and practice since they are in high school to support their writing skill when taking academic writing in higher education, and to help them produce readers-friendly English passages. To improve further their skills in writing, it is prudent to have writing process approaches when teaching them either in high school or at university level.

In school, writing assignments are more to display writing, of which the teacher is the sole reader. The writing itself is only to display one’s knowledge. Here, writing is used as writing-for-learning role where students write mainly to enhance their grammar and vocabulary learning of the language. However, this type of writing is designed to help learn the language and it does not have a counterpart in the real world (Rubin, 1994). Hence, we need to give them opportunity to write as writing-for-writing, where students are able to study written text in order to become better writers. By given appropriate time, the students can become better writers by developing efficient processes for achieving the final writing product.

Methods

To identify what the challenges that they have when writing are, their writing products were analyzed, and a sixteen-item questionnaire was distributed to fifty freshmen students. They were asked questions, regarding their writing skills background, to find out whether their limitations in writing were affected by their lack of writing exposure when they were in high school.
Sample Paragraphs

Paragraph 1: source Romaesa, rewritten as original

Music is part of my world. Various genres of music I like, for example pop, dangdut, rap, R & B, reggae, jazz. At any time I want to play music, even when sick though. I mostly make my music alone is to sing my songs themselves. The music is like my life path winding. I understand more than just the benefits of music. music is to entertain the tired body and mind. More than the music gives us peace of mind. Music is able to give us the spirit to live this life. But music can show you the wrong way if you do not understand the meaning of the music.

Paragraph 2: source Frederick, rewritten as original

So many people think that music gives a lot of benefits to human being. In fact, as we can see that when there were times someone had a bad day, he will prefer to listen to the music to relieve all of the burdens he faced. For me, music does not only give a refreshment, but also extends a lot of spaces for us to improve our art interests. Not only we become creative, but also we will try to pay attention to the music patterns carefully and make an effort to play the songs with musical instruments. On the other hand, music can give a negative effect to adolescent this ages. For instance, students who are too fascinated with music will get influenced in his study's achievement. Therefore, this kind of students have had bad marks and usually do not focus in class.

Result and Discussion

Challenges in Students' Writing

In academic writing there is common academic context. Students who write in academic settings have to master the concepts and contents of their subject area as well as develop an ability to express themselves effectively and appropriately in the foreign language (Tribble, 1996). Also, writing in EAP follows certain kinds of text construction. One of the academic skills that they need to master is a different range of display writing techniques. Writing is produced and mediated through writers’ experiences of prior discourse. If they do not have the experience of writing academic texts when they are in high school, this will become a limitation.

In sample paragraph 1, apart from her limitation in structure, she has many redundancies and unrelated sentences. According to Brown (1994), writers must learn how to remove redundancy and how to combine sentences and much more. Her writing is strongly influenced by the nature of her first language. Writing is a culturally bound activity of one’s language. Writers have their sets of culturally defined criteria and ideas of good writing that is based on their prior cultural or social experiences. Connor (1996) also suggested that L2 writers draw on a range of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences at the sentence, paragraph, and textual level. Linguistically and culturally bound assumptions about the nature and purposes of written texts can transfer from one language to another. She explained that ESL students when they write, they attend or attempt to translate their first language words, phrases and organization to English.

Kaplan (1966) once noted that different languages and cultures have different patterns of written discourse. He investigated L2 writing teaching and developed contrastive rhetoric. Contrastive rhetoric identifies problems in composition encountered by L2 writers and by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the L1. Kaplan Contrastive rhetoric maintains that language and writing are cultural phenomena. Each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it. Writers have certain preconception about writing which they have learned in their own cultures and which may be inappropriate in native English-speaking settings (Hyland, 2002). Kaplan’s thesis in contrastive rhetoric showed that English proceeds in a straight line while oriental writing moves in a spiraling line. The nature of Indonesian writing style resembles a spiraling line, where the development of ideas goes circling, thus creating redundancy. The concept of ‘good writing’ in the society is that writers produce as many sentences as possible. The more sentences they produce, the more able writers they are considered. However, this is unacceptable in English rhetoric which demands clarity.

In sample paragraph 2, even though the writer shows his competence in grammar, unfortunately his organization is poor. In this paragraph, he has three ideas: benefits of music to human beings, benefits of music to himself, and the negative effects of music to humans. Brown (1994) stated that writing is a thinking process and learned behavior; therefore, we need to regard writing as a cultural activity, and to engage students in the writing process. Because writing is learned, rather than taught, providing sufficient training in the process of writing combined with practice in display writing can help the students to deal with the organization of ideas.

Answers to the Writing Challenges of Students

Although the respondents responded that they were taught to write a paragraph when they were at school, it seemed they did not get much training. The high school curriculum for 2013-2014 puts teaching writing in its syllabi of the second and third grade. For example, in the second grade, students are instructed to write a simple factual report about nature, animals, or things, but, unfortunately, for the assessment criteria such as organizing and developing areas are not included. To minimize the problems that occur in their writing, there are some suggestions that can be considered and done.
The first thing that can be done to help students improve their writing is by giving them more input and exposure since they are in high school. People write on different topics and purposes that will determine the style and the genre of the text. Thus, students need to be made aware of how that works in English in order that they can choose and use language appropriately. A major part of the teacher’s job is to expose students to language so that they can use it later. Teachers can get them to look at the versions of some academic writing texts and let them identify any similarities of construction. Rather than modeling the practices of experts, it seeks to offer students a guiding framework for producing texts by raising their awareness of the connections between forms, purposes and participant roles in specific social contexts (Hall and Gollin in Hyland, 2002).

Those exposures can become inputs for them as they present authentic samples of the language to which the learners are exposed (Ellis, 1997). Learners possess cognitive mechanism which enable them to extract information about the L2 from the input. Learning takes place when learners have the opportunity to practice giving correct response to a given stimulus, and they imitate models of correct language. Language learning takes a long time, for languages are complex systems. Each system is different and requires reorganization of thinking, lots of exposure, and a great amount of practice (Rubin, 1994).

Another solution that can be considered is adapting the writing process approach when they take EAP at the university. The process approach is to give students a chance to think as they write. It focuses on the process writing that leads to the final written products, helps student writers to understand their own composing process, helps them to build repertoires of strategies for prewriting, drafting, and revising, gives student time to write and rewrite, places central importance on the process of revision, lets students discover what they want to say as they write, and gives students feedback throughout the composing process (Shih 1986 in Brown 1994). Process writing approaches tend to be framed in 3 stages of writing: prewriting, drafting, and revising. The prewriting stage encourages the generating ideas: reading extensively a passage brainstorming, listing, discussing a topic, and free writing. By doing those processes, students will be fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, those activities will build students writing habit that eventually makes them feel comfortable writing in English. The more students write the better and more fluent they become as writers. They develop their range of written expression and write with greater ease and decrease their anxiety.

In EAP at University of Indonesia, students are assumed that they have developed competencies in English writing. Yet, teachers find a lot of learners who may not have learned to write effectively even in their L1. In this case, they need more time for planning and editing. Thus, it needs the writing process approach that has four elements: planning, drafting, editing, and final revision. Also teachers need to take into account giving more exposures. This can involve exposing students to a variety of texts within the relevant target genre. Those offer pedagogically useful information for guiding students to greater control of organization and style of their texts (Hyland, 2002).

Holts (1995) in Brown (1994) designed a course; Writ 101, as a solution for undergraduate to build an awareness of genre by composing through a series of core assignments. It focuses on the formal features of academic registers and disciplinary genres to develop techniques for generating, drafting, revising, and responding to a variety of texts. It seeks to give process a classroom presence and adopt many of the principles of a process approach to writing. It emphasizes the importance of engaging students in a recursive process of planning, drafting, reviewing, evaluating, and revising. Considerable emphasis is laid on helping students become aware of writing as a series of stages in order to help them compose free of the distraction of achieving correctness and completeness as they write.

**Conclusion**

Learning a language is a long process that consumes time. Because teaching writing is not easy, it becomes the last skill to be taught. As a result, many students are not familiar with the organization of English texts. It causes problems when they take English for Academic Purposes in higher Education. They face difficulties in organizing and developing ideas. They do not know how to present their ideas and how to arrange them in appropriate constructions. Their writing is also affected by the writing nature in their L1. They tend to write in spiraling manner; thus; the message is not well delivered and confusing. Those limitations hold them back to write, and every time they write, they feel anxious to produce a good piece of writing.

To facilitate them, teachers need to introduce a wide range of English academic texts since they are in high school. Getting more exposure will build their writing competencies and their confidence. Giving more writing practice will train them to use acceptable English rhetoric. To produce a good text also needs a process. Teachers can use writing process approach whenever they teach writing. Although the process is long, the result is worth the effort.
References