



The Portrait on Undergraduate Students' Problems in Paragraph Development

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Abstract

From time to time, many researchers have been paying attention to carry out the studies on writing skill in different aspects. This paper looks at the students problems in paragraph development. The participants in this study were twenty six English Education-students at State University of Malang which have been attending Paragraph Writing course. The researcher used two instruments to collect the data. The result showed that there are several problems found by undergraduate students in writing a paragraph. The problems are classified into three aspects; mechanic that consists of four components (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and abbreviation), grammar that consists of nine components (tense, subject agreement, regular and irregular verbs, regular and irregular nouns, article, to be, conjunction, reported speech, parallel list), and organization that consists of three components (topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence). The recommendation given was based on the research finding.

Keywords: portrait, undergraduate students' problems, paragraph development

INTRODUCTION

English as foreign language is widely used throughout the world. In Indonesia, it is taught from junior high school until University. At university, it is taught as English for specific purpose to support their majors. At junior and senior high schools, it is taught covering integrated skills, including writing skill.

Having mastered listening, speaking, and reading skills, a language learner should master writing skill because mastering all language skills, including writing skill, will make him/her more competent in a language. In other words, a good language learner is required to have four language skills completely. In addition, writing skill is considered to play a role in the learner's academic achievement. Related to learning to write, Harmer (1998) says that writing should be taught for several reasons. First, writing is useful for reinforcement. Most students acquire a language from seeing the language written down.

The students even often find it useful to write sentences using new language shortly after they have studied it. Second, writing is also useful for language development. The actual process of writing helps the students to learn as they go along. The mental activity they have to go through in order to construct a proper written text is all part of the ongoing learning experience. Third, it is a learning style. Writing can be a quiet reflective activity. Some language learners will be able to master a language if they experiences using the language, like writing activity. At last, writing is a skill. The students need to know, for instance, how to write letter and how to reply to an advertisement. In addition, they also should know some of writing convention (e.g. punctuation, paragraph construction). It is considered to play a role to someone's academic achievement.

In Indonesian context, writing instruction has been offered from junior and senior high school. The instruction is known as genre-based teaching. However, writing skill actually can be developed from elementary school in which the activities can be designed in the form of writing self-identity, or copying what teacher is writing on whiter board. This activity is aimed in order that the students are used to using language skill in written form.

There are many studies conducted by researchers related to students' writing ability. Some of them are Sabarun (2006) who analyzed the improvement of students' writing ability through cooperative learning strategy at university level, Attamim (2007) who studied the implementation of cooperative learning strategy to improve college students' proficiency in writing paragraph, Ulfiati (2010) who reported a study about cohesive devices in papers written by college students of English Department, and Isnawati (2010) who conducted a study about the improvement the English students' writing skill using Task-based language teaching. In their research report, they stated the phenomenon about students' writing.

In their studies, they also stated that the students had problems in writing. In general, the students had low motivation, poor writing ability, and lack of confidence. Concerning with low motivation, the students did not do the exercises seriously and many of them did not bring dictionary into classroom to help them in writing. If they have problem with vocabulary while they are writing, they borrowed dictionary from their friends or asked their friends about it. It seems that they did not consider writing skill important for them. Their poor writing ability was reflected in the facts that they often did not know what to write, how to organize ideas well, how to explore ideas, and they did many mistakes related to basic grammar (ungrammatical sentences and inappropriate transitional signal) and vocabulary (wrong words choice). If they could complete the writing task, the result was far from what was expected to be. They were also not confident with what they were writing. They tend to rewrite what they had written. For them, what they had written was not good and not in line with what they wanted. It seems that this condition is line with Cahyono and Widiati's statement (2011) saying that writing is often believed to be the most complex one compared to the three other skills (listening, speaking, and reading. In the same vein, Nunan (1999) states that writing is something native speakers never master. Furthermore, he says that for second language learners, the challenges are

more enormous, particularly for those who go on to university and study a language that is not their own. Richard and Renandya (2002) say that the skills involved in writing are highly complex. It consists of the higher level skills of planning and organizing ideas as well as the lower level skill of spelling, punctuation, and word choice. Thus, it is clear that writing skill requires someone to have complete competence in order that s/he can write well in English.

The researchers above said that the problems stated above were caused by many factors. Some of them are that teacher dominated the teaching-learning process, the teacher seldom gave writing practice and rarely acted as facilitator, guide, and motivator, and writing activities in the classroom were boring. Teaching-learning process should be students-centered because students are expected to have knowledge in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, it is a big mistake if the teacher dominates the teaching-learning process. Learning a language, including learning writing skill, does not mean memorizing a theory. It is a habit and skill formation that requires a lot of exercises. It is similar to a baby who is always stimulated to use his mother tongue. He is never forced to memorize utterances given to him. In the classroom, the teacher's task is as a facilitator, guide, and motivator. She should facilitate students' learning needs during teaching learning-process. It means that she always should be available to help and guide students in teaching learning process. In addition, she also should be able to motivate students to learn, so that, the students have high learning interest. One of ways that can be used by teacher to keep students' high motivation and interest is providing various interesting writing activities because using different technique can attract students' motivation and interest.

In general, this article is aimed at investigating problems that are faced by students in developing a paragraph. Specifically, it will investigate students' problems that are related to grammar use, vocabulary, and mechanics. These components become the focus of study because they are always available in written works.

METHOD

The participants in this study were twenty six English Education-students at State University of Malang which have been attending Paragraph Writing course. They were in second semester when this study was conducted. The reason the writer used to choose the second semester students was that they were learning and experiencing the process of writing a paragraph. So, they know their problems exactly in developing a paragraph and they can tell the writer about the problems frankly. If the researcher conducted this study to fourth semester students, he worried that he could not get the real data which he wanted because the students are in intermediate level in which they have not experienced and got a lot knowledge related to writing paragraph. Probably, their ability in writing a paragraph cannot appear like what the writer actually wanted. Because they have passed writing paragraph course for two semesters, the writer worried that they do not give the real condition.

In this study, the researcher used two instruments to collect the data in order that the researcher could get information more deeply about students' problems in writing paragraph. The instruments are writing test and questioner. In writing test, the researcher provided 4 topics related to daily activities. Here, the students were asked to choose one of them and developed it into a paragraph. In addition, if the topics were not interesting for them, they were also allowed to find their own topic and developed it into a paragraph. The researcher had a certain reason to give them a chance to write their own topic. If the topic is not interesting for them, but they should develop it into paragraph, it can be predicted that they will have trouble developing it. If they are allowed to write down their own topic, it is assumed that they have something to write down. It means that all participants could show their best to develop a paragraph. In developing a paragraph, the students were given 100 minutes. Regarding with questioner, the researcher developed 17 items to be completed by students. The questioner consists of items which are related to students' problems in writing generally; finding ideas to write, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Item 1 is related to finding idea to write. Items 2-5 are related to mechanics which consists of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and abbreviation. Items 6-14 are related to grammar that consists of problems is using tenses, subject agreement, regular and irregular verbs, regular and irregular nouns, article *a/an* and *the*, conjunction, reported speech, and parallel list. Items 15-17 are related to problems in developing topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. The items of questionnaire chosen to be asked are ones which are more often used in developing a paragraph.

In using the two instruments, the writer gave writing test first and questioner next. The writing test was given first in order that the students could concentrate their mind fully and they could fill in the questionnaire based on problems they just found in writing a paragraph.

FINDINGS

Based on the data analysis conducted, it was found that most of students had problems in developing a paragraph. The following is the detail of findings gained from questionnaire and writing test used as instruments to collect research data.

1. Questionnaire

Based on the students' response toward item 1 of questionnaire, it was found that 24 of 26 subjects said that they had a problem in finding an idea to write. This condition is crucial because the percentage of subjects who had problem on idea is close to 100%. This means that most of participants encounter fundamental problem in writing paragraph. Such a condition can influence students' performance in developing a paragraph. In other words, the students cannot develop a paragraph if they do not have idea to write.

Seen from mechanics that consist of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and abbreviation, it was found that 18 of 26 subjects had a problem on mechanic in general.

In detail, the percentage of students who had problems in spelling is 85% of 26 subjects, in using punctuation properly is 77%, in using capitalization is 42%, and in using abbreviation is 73%. Problems in spelling, punctuation, and abbreviation found in this study are a serious phenomenon because the percentage of subjects who had problem in the aspects is above 50% of total participants. This means that mechanics in writing is one of obstacles that makes most of students have problem in writing. Spelling problem is one in which students will look up dictionary many times to make sure about the spelling of the words that will be used in a paragraph. Punctuation problem in this study is a condition in which students cannot develop correct and meaningful sentences because they cannot use punctuation properly. Capitalization problem will give impression to readers that writer is careless. This can misguide readers to understand message available in a paragraph. Although the abbreviation is seldom used in a paragraph, this is also important to be considered because if a writer does not use abbreviation properly, it will give make readers have problem in understanding the meaning of abbreviation used.

Concerning with grammar points, it was found that 20 of 26 students had problems generally in composing grammatical sentences in writing a paragraph. In detail, 96% of subjects had problem in using correct tense in writing a paragraph, subject agreement (81%), regular and irregular verbs (81%), regular and irregular nouns (58%), article **a/an** and **the** (77%), in using to be (**are, am, is**) and **be** (54%), conjunctions (88%), reported speech (77%), and in using parallel list (81%).

Seen from organization of idea in writing, 23 of 26 students had problem in developing topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences. In detail, students had problem in developing main idea (85%), supporting sentences (88%), and concluding sentences (88%).

2. Writing test

Based on the result of analyzing students' writing test using inter-rate method (writer and another English students who has been attending Doctor's degree program at State University of Malang), the writer found evidences related to students' response towards questionnaire.

Regarding with punctuation, the example of students' problem is *to be a good worker you must ...* (students did not give coma after the word *worker*), *In addition you should...* (students did not give coma after the word *addition*). The examples of capital letter found are *taking a picture*, *Recording a video*, *to go to Abroad....*

In using Tense, the subjects produced the wrong sentences seen from tense. For example, *Recently, I have been watching a circus, when the fire burned the forest, urangutan will lose....* The examples of problem in subjects agreement are *the second things is...*, *other cases is....* The examples of problem in article are *a/an* and *the* are *marriage has many advantages. First, marriage helps us..., everyone need mobile phone for communication. Mobile phone has* The examples of problem in conjunction are *mobile phone is a gadget who ...*, *there are several things that keep.*

In organizing idea of writing, students did not develop a topic sentence properly in a paragraph. As example is *I do not know since when, but whenever I read something and found a vocabulary that I did not understand, I would look for the meaning immediately. English is interesting ... I guess I have a lot of reasons to study English.* This example cannot be used to develop a good paragraph because the first and second sentences are not related.

DISCUSSION

The percentage of students who had problem in finding an idea to write (92%) indicates that the students did not know what and how to write. Having an idea to write is the main aspect that a writer should have because he can do nothing if he does not have an idea in his mind. Therefore, what was found in this study is a serious problem, how the students can develop a paragraph while they do not have idea to write. It often happens that many students rewrite a new paragraph because what they have written does not show a clear point.

The finding on students' problem in grammar gained in this study reflects that the students have trouble using different tenses which seem similar in use. The problem related to tense happens because the students do not recognize tense in their mother tongue. So, when they are asked to develop a paragraph which probably has several tenses in which several different forms of a verb should be used, they are confused to decide what tense to use. As an example, students tend to be confused when they should decide to use present perfect, present perfect continuous, or past perfect tense. For the second semester-students in undergraduate program, using tenses properly are difficult enough.

As stated above that more than 50% students had problem in using subject agreement, it means that students miss attention to focus on subject and predicate of a sentence in which predicate in a simple sentence is determined by singular or plural subject. If the subject is plural, the predicate may not get suffix -s/-es. In addition, if a sentence should have 'to be' (are, am, is), the plural subject will use **are** and if the subject is singular (3rd singular person), **is** will be used. Like problem in using tense, the problem in subject agreement occurs because the students do not find such a rule in their mother language.

Using regular and irregular verbs is a problem the students also often find in developing a paragraph. This condition occurs because students should recognize different forms of a verb in simple past tense and past participle (for irregular verbs). This is not easy for students because there is any rule that guide how a verb can have the same form for different tenses (simple present, past tense, and past participle) and how a verb can have the different form for different tenses (simple present, past tense, and past participle). Probably, the students do not have any problem in using regular verbs because the rule is so simple, students just add -ed suffix for simple past tense and past participle.

Using regular and irregular nouns is also a problem the students also often find in developing a paragraph. This condition occurs because students should recognize

different forms for plural noun. For example; child → children, mouse → mice, tooth → teeth, etc. Sometimes, the students misuse the plural noun. For example, two childrens or three mouses.

Seen from problem in using article **a/an** and **the**, it cannot be denied that Indonesian students also have a problem about the article. Let us see two following examples, 1) *marriage has many advantages. First, marriage helps us...*, 2) *everyone need mobile phone for communication. mobile phone has ...*the problem found the examples is the writer did not use article **the** for definite nouns of the two sentences (**first, the marriage helps ...** in first sentence and **the mobile phone has ...** in second sentence)

Related to using **be**, the Indonesian students often have problem in using **be**. Based on the questionnaire used in this study, 54% of subjects admitted this. The problem occurs when they do not use **be** in a sentence that uses modal auxiliary and have adjective or noun and in a sentence in which **to** is followed by an adjective.

Based on the writing test in this study, the writer found a problem related to conjunction. The problem is available when the students used the wrong conjunction for adjective clause. Let see the following example; 1) *mobile phone is a gadget who ...*, 2) *there are several things that keep....* In first example, the writer used **who** (usually used to represent person) for representing thing. Meanwhile, in second example, the writer used **that** (usually used to represent a singular noun) for representing plural noun

As stated above, 77% of subject had problem in using reported speech. The Indonesian students often have problem making reported speech, especially in form of question. For example, *I do not know how can she speak English well*. In this case, the Indonesia students still think that the position of modal auxiliary in reported wh-question is still before subject.

Using parallel list is also a problem for Indonesian students because they think that gerund and to infinitive can be used in one sentence. To make clear, let see the following sentences; a) **drinking** alcohol and **smoking** are dangerous for our health, b) **to drink** alcohol and **to smoke** are dangerous for our health. The meaning of verbs formed in gerund as in sentence **a** is the same as the meaning of verbs formed in to infinitive as in sentence **b**. Therefore, they conclude that it is ok if gerund and to infinitive is used in one sentence.

As mentioned above, the subjects had problem with organization of idea of a paragraph. In detail, the data showed that subjects had problems in developing topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. In general, if a student cannot develop a topic sentence, it means that he does not know what the function of a topic sentence is and what the topic sentence should present. If he does not understand the topic sentence well, he will not be able to develop supporting sentences because the topic sentences are developed based on the controlling idea available in topic sentence. The concluding sentence whose position is the last sentence of a paragraph can be developed easily if the writer has mastered topic sentence and supporting sentences well. Logically, mastering

topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence well will produce a good paragraph.

Problems found in this study meet some previous researches conducted by Budiharso (2006), Farooq, et.al (2012), and Kim (...). Budiharso says that EFL students (Indonesians) has problem related to Grammar and mechanic. Farooq& friends that EFL students have a poor understanding of grammatical structure. Kim says that EFL students (Koreans) have problem organization idea and grammar.

CONCLUSION

Based on what has been presented in findings and discussion, it can be concluded that there are several problems found by undergraduate students in writing a paragraph. The problems are classified into three aspects; mechanic that consists of four components (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and abbreviation), grammar that consists of nine components (tense, subject agreement, regular and irregular verbs, regular and irregular nouns, article, to be, conjunction, reported speech, parallel list), and organization that consists of three components (topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence). Among the three aspects, the most serious problem found by students is organization aspect (87%). Seen from mechanic, the most serious problem found by students is related to spelling (85%). Seen from grammar, the most serious problem found by students is related to tense (96%). Seen from organization, the most serious problem found by students is related to developing supporting sentences, and concluding sentence (88% for each). Among all items investigated, the most serious problem faced by students in developing a paragraph is related to finding idea to write (96%). This means that the students had a problem related to the crucial component needed in developing a paragraph.

In line with the conclusion stated above, some recommendations are given here for the betterment of students' writing competence. First, the writing lecturer is recommended to provide and facilitate students with activities that can make them accustomed with writing a lot. Second, the writing lecturer is also recommended to provide and facilitate grammatical activities as well as writing activity to improve the students' grammar competence, especially tenses. Then, the students are suggested to practice writing a lot either in classroom or outside classroom. Finally, the future study is recommended to investigate what problems students have in developing an essay.

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APPENDIX 1

Writing Task

Direction: Write a paragraph (about 100-150 words) on one of the following topics.

Pay attention to grammatical patterns, capital letters, conjunctions, etc.

1. My reasons to study English
2. Living in a boarding house
3. Mobile phone
4. Studying in university
5. Your own topic

=good luck=

APPENDIX 2

Questionnaire

Direction: Please answer the following questions based on the real conditions you have in developing paragraph.

No		R e s p o n s e s			
		always	sometimes	often	Never
1	Do you have problem identifying idea to write for your paragraph?				
Mechanic					
2	Do you have problem using spelling in developing paragraph?				
3	Do you have problem using punctuation in developing paragraph?				
4	Do you have problem using capitalization in developing paragraph?				
5	Do you have problem using abbreviation in developing paragraph?				
Grammar					
6	Do you have problem using tenses in developing paragraph?				
7	Do you have problem using <i>subject agreement</i> in developing paragraph? ex: <u>Many people is</u> afraid of him				
8	Do you have problem using <i>regular and irregular verbs</i> in developing paragraph?				
9	Do you have problem using <i>regular and irregular nouns</i> in developing paragraph? Ex: a book → 2 books, child → children				
10	Do you have problem using article <u>a, an, the</u> in developing paragraph?				
11	Do you have problem using <i>to be (are, am, is)</i> and <i>be</i> in developing paragraph?				
12	Do you have problem using conjunction in developing paragraph?				
13	Do you have problem using reported speech in developing paragraph? Ex: I want to know how Joseph Merrick made such a beautiful picture				
14	Do you have problem using <i>parallel list</i> in developing paragraph? Ex: Drinking alcohol and to smoke are dangerous for our health				
Organisation					
15	Do you have problem writing topic sentence in developing paragraph?				
16	Do you have problem writing supporting sentences in developing paragraph?				
17	Do you have problem writing concluding sentence in developing paragraph?				