
INVESTIGATING EFL LEARNERS' ABILITY IN APPLYING WRITING MECHANICS IN AN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating EFL learners' ability in applying writing mechanics in writing an argumentative essay. Quantitative method with descriptive quantitative design was employed in this study. To collect the data, the writing test and unstructured interview were used in this research. This research was conducted on April 2018 at Universitas Lancang Kuning, Pekanbaru. There were 46 learners selected as participants in this research. The result of the writing test showed that the learners' mean score was 64.6 and it was categorized into fair level of ability. Moreover, based on the interview the learners said that they felt difficult in applying good mechanics in their writing. It was because the learners had low alertness and carefulness in writing, low motivation to write an essay, low confidence when writing, and seldom to practice writing at leisure time. Therefore, appropriate writing strategy supported by suitable learning materials is needed to facilitate and improve the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics in their writing. In conclusion, the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative essay is in fair level of ability.

Keywords: *EFL learners, Writing mechanics, Argumentative essay*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the language skills that should be mastered by English Foreign Language (EFL) learners in university level, especially in English Study Program Faculty of Teachers Training and Education University of Lancang Kuning Pekanbaru. This is because the learners' achievement in writing can be used as a valuable contribution towards the development of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia, especially in the teaching of writing skill.

One of the writing skills that should be mastered by the students is writing an essay correctly. The better ability the students have in writing an essay, the better ability they have in writing another form of writing such as: academic writing, scientific writing, argumentative essay, or various English text types.

In writing, there are two aspects that should be considered. First, writing process such as: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Fachrurrazy, 2011: 90). Second, micro and macro skills of writing such as correct use of diction, grammar, and mechanics such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling (Brown, 2007: 90). By considering those aspects of writing, writing activity will be easy and enable good improvement.

In line with those aspects, there are two another elements that should be existed in a composition. These two elements are unity and coherence. Oshima and Hogue (2006: 18) state that unity is single idea in a paragraph and coherence is the relationship between one sentence to another or one paragraph to another. So, good paragraph or essay should be developed by good unity and coherence.

Pertaining to the statement above, writing mechanics seems to become unnecessary for the learners. Most the EFL learners, especially the learners in English Departement of Universitas Lancang Kuning always ignore, leave, or skipped away the writing mechanics such as: the correct use of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling in their composition.

In accordance with those statements, the researcher interested to conduct a research in order to investigate the students' ability in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative writing. Moreover, the result of this research can give clear description of the students' ability in writing an essay, especially in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative essay. In addition, the result of this research can be used as an evaluation of writing course to improve the quality of the teaching of writing skill.

1.1 Research Question

The research question of this study can be formulated as follows: How is the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative essay?

1.2 Objective of the Study

This study aims at investigating the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative essay.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research is expected to be useful especially for: the learners, the teachers, and future researchers.

1. Learners

The learners can get a reflection of their ability in writing an essay.

2. Lecturers

The lecturers can get clear picture of the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative essay.

3. Future researchers

The references used in this study can be used by the next researchers to conduct further research.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

a. Theoretical Basis

In writing, there are many kinds of composition that can be produced such as paragraph and essay. Paragraph consist of several sentences explaining the topic (Hornby: 2010). Paragraph is also a group of related sentences which develop main idea of the topic. In a paragraph, there are three structures that can be written in a paragraph. The three structures of paragraph are: topic sentence, supporting sentence, and concluding sentence (Oshima and Hogue, 2006: 3-4). So, a good paragraph is a paragraph which contains the three structures of paragraph.

Meanwhile, essay is a group of paragraph which explains the subject or certain idea (Hornby:2010). In addition, good paragraph and essay should consist of Unity and Coherence. Oshima and Hogue (2006: 18) state that unity is single idea in a paragraph, meanwhile coherence means idea in one sentence to another or one paragraph or another is hold together. So, a good paragraph or essay is a paragraph or essay which contains good unity and coherence.

In relation to the previous explanation, there are some aspects that should be considered in writing paragraph and essay. Those aspects are: Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Grammar, Mechanics (Brown, 2007: 90). As a result, by considering those aspects, the paragraph and essay will be well composed.

b. Relevant Research

In this part, the researcher highlights some previous research which relevant to this research in order to support the theories used in this research. The relevant researches are as follow.

1. The research conducted by Abbas (2017) about assessing and evaluating EFL learners' ability in writing academic essay. After conducting the research, it was found that the learners' ability in writing academic essay was low. It was basically influenced by the difficulties in using correct grammar, diction and applying correct mechanics in their writing such as: punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.
2. The research done by Abbas (2015) about analysis of students' ability in writing a research proposal. From the finding, it can be identified that the students' difficulties in writing the research proposal was basically influenced by the students' difficulty in using correct grammar and writing mechanics: spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

3. The research done by Gupta and Woldemariam (2011) about the influence of motivation and attitude toward writing strategy. From this research, it can be explained that the students with high motivation in writing can be viewed from high level of interest in writing, confident, good ability, and good attitude toward writing strategy. This result showed that, in order to be able to write composition well, it needs good motivation and high level of confident supported by good attitude and thought.
4. The research conducted by Hasan and Akhand (2010) about approaches to Writing in EFL/ESL Context: Balancing Product and Process in Writing Class at Tertiary Level. From the finding, it can be indicated that collaborating both writing product and process could make the students to become outperform in the class. Of course all writing aspects including writing mechanics was applied correctly in the students' writing.
5. The research done by *CROSSLEY, KYLE, VARNER, AND MCNAMARA (2014) ABOUT "The Importance of Grammar and Mechanics in Writing Assessment and Instruction: Evidence from Data Mining"*. Based on the findings, it was showed that there was weak relations between grammar errors and holistic essay scores and stronger relations between mechanics and holistic essay scores.
6. The research investigated by Faraj (2015) about "Scaffolding EFL Students' Writing through the Writing Process Approach". This research finding showed that the result that students' achievement in post-test compare to pre-test revealed significant improvement. Also, scaffolding students' writings through writing process approach met the students' needs in EFL writing, and then it has improved their writing skill, while most of them have had difficulty in the basic elements of writing, e.g. grammar. In addition, learners could more confidentially express their ideas in their writings.
7. The research investigated by Dabbagh (2017) about "The Effect of Dialogue Journal Writing on EFL Learners' Descriptive Writing Performance: A Quantitative Study". The findings proved that the results of independent sample *t*-test located a significant difference between the experimental and control group regarding the overall writing performance, as well as the sub-components of content, organization, and vocabulary in the post-test. However, the obtained results did not reveal a significant effect of dialogue journal writing on language use and mechanics of writing performance.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study was descriptive quantitative. In this study, the researcher analyzed the data quantitatively by using scoring rubric. Then, the researcher described data descriptively. Moreover, the procedures of this research are as follow.

1. The researcher prepared the writing test for the students.
2. The researcher analyzed the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics.
3. The researcher interviewed the students to get additional information.
4. The researcher concluded the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics.

3.2 Setting of the Study

The setting of this study was at English Education Department Faculty of Teachers Training and Education University of Lancang Kuning Pekanbaru, Riau Province, Indonesia.

3.3 Participants

The participants of this study were 46 learners. Moreover, the detail information about participants of this research can be seen at the Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 The Participants of the Study

No	Grade	Learners
1	IV A	23
2	IV B	23
Total		46 learners

3.4 Technique of Collecting Data

In this research, the researcher collected the data by using test. The test used was writing an argumentative essay. Then, the students were asked to write an essay for about 5 paragraph (500 words) in 90 minutes length. After that, the researcher interviewed the students to gain additional information about students' ability in writing an essay, especially in applying writing mechanics.

3.5 Technique of Analyzing the Data

The data which has been collected through the test was analyzed by using scoring rubric of essay writing. Then, the data from interview was analyzed descriptively. Moreover, the scoring rubric can be seen in the table below.

Table 3.2 The Scoring Rubric for Writing Mechanics

Aspect	Criteria	Scores	Categories
Mechanics: Spelling, punctuation, capitalization.	- Very little errors of mechanics	86-100	Very Good
	- Few errors of mechanics, but meaning not obscured	71-85	Good
	- Many errors of mechanics, and meaning obscured	56-70	Fair
	- Dominated by errors of mechanics	10-55	Poor

(Adapted from Abbas: 2015)

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

In accordance with the data gained in this study, it can be stated that the learners' score in writing an argumentative essay was categorized into **Fair level**. It was because the learners' mean score was **64.6**. For further information, the learners' score obtained from the test can be seen at the Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 The Learners' Score

No	Obtained Score	Score category	Number of students
1	80-82	Very Good	5
2	72-79	Good	12
3	57-69	Fair	18
4	47-55	Poor	11

In addition, the data from the Table 4.1 can also be presented in the Diagram 4.1 below.

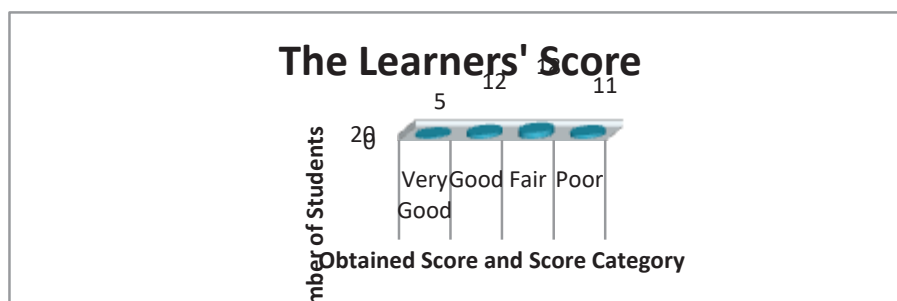


Diagram 4.1 The Learners' Score

From the Diagram above, it can be identified that 5 learners achieved very good score category with the score range 80-82, then 12 learners obtained good score category with the score range 72-79, 18 learners got fair score category with the score range 57-69, and 11 learners got poor score category with the score range 47-55.

In accordance with the data obtained from the test, based on the result of interview, it can be explained that the learners difficulties in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative essay were basically influenced by the alertness and the capability to write carefully in the essay. Mostly, the learners need to finish their writing as soon as possible, and it made them to become not alert with their writing especially in terms of writing mechanics such as the use of capital letter, punctuation, and spelling. Therefore, appropriate learning materials supported by appropriate writing strategy are needed to facilitate and improve the learners' ability in applying writing mechanics. This is in line with the research done by Hasan and Akhand (2010), CROSSLEY, KYLE, VARNER, AND MCNAMARA (2014), Faraj (2015), and Dabbagh (2017) about the importance of grammar, mechanics, and the appropriate strategy of writing activity.

In relation to the previous statement, the students difficulties in applying writing mechanics were basically influenced by 3 factors such as: low motivation to write an essay, low confidence when writing, and seldom to practice writing at leisure time. This is in line with the research done by Gupta and Woldemariam (2011) about motivation and confidence toward writing a composition.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the learners' score in writing an essay is categorized into fair level score category. This is because the learners' mean score is 64.6. In addition, it can be stated that the students' achievement in applying writing mechanics in an argumentative essay is influenced by several difficulties and factors such as: the students alertness and carefulness in writing, low motivation to write an essay, low confidence when writing, and seldom to practice writing at leisure time.

From this result, the students' difficulties or problems in applying writing mechanics in argumentative essay can be solved by considering appropriate or effective writing strategy. Therefore, it is suggested to future researchers to follow-up this research to become classroom action research or experimental research design as one of the solutions to overcome the students' problem in writing the essay or to see how effective the strategy in the teaching of writing.

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