

Students' Grammatical Problems in Writing Simple Paragraphs: Lack of Grammatical Competency or Language Carelessness?

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Abstract

The real language condition in Indonesia is that most learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) have already had and communicated in their own mother tongues and *bahasa Indonesia* as the national language. For many reasons, the grammar instruction of EFL is essential to build grammatical competency, language awareness, and communicative ability. Therefore, the instructional processes of English grammar have an important role in order to provide the learners with sufficient grammatical competency and language awareness on English. The grammatical problems made by the students in written communication are not relatively allowed, then. The students' grammatical problems in writing should be initially corrected and academically improved. This paper, developed based on a part of research results conducted in 2013/2014 academic year at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang, discusses *the forms and types of students' grammatical problems in writing simple paragraphs*. In addition, *the discussion continues to analyze whether the grammatical problems found in the learners' simple paragraphs can be academically assigned as lack of grammatical competency and/or their own language carelessness*. The data are students' grammatical problems found in their written simple paragraphs. The data analysis may reasonably come to the conclusion that most of the grammatical problems belong to student's lack of grammatical competency and the others to their language carelessness.

Keywords/phrases: *grammatical problems, writing, paragraph, grammatical competency, language carelessness*

A. Introduction

Academically, the learning outcomes of EFL learning are the result of the interactions between the teaching and learning processes, the context of the instructional programs, and the students' factors. The teaching context, on one side, is the environment set by the teacher and the institution through the course structure, curriculum content, methods of teaching and assessment. The student factors, on another side, may include prior knowledge, ways of learning, motivation, expectation, etc. Both student and teaching presage factors interact in particular and complex ways to produce an approach to learning, which produces its characteristic outcome (Biggs, 1989; and see also Refnita, 2013a, b). In accordance with this, learning outcomes are resulted from instructional programs and practical executions, in general.

It is highly believed that there are many components needed in any instructional programs and learning processes. One important thing, among the others, to build linguistic competence and language awareness on EFL is the grammar instruction. Well-programmed of grammatical instructions and professional execution at classrooms may build better linguistic competence and language awareness on the foreign language. Moreover, the success of EFL learning becomes higher if it is supported by appropriate assessments and school's facilities. It is sure that the ideal outcomes are not always easy to be obtained as they are orally mentioned.

Based on pre-observation and writer's experience as a lecturer of *English Grammar* and *Writing II* subjects at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, it has been found that there are a lot of grammatical problems (may be errors and/or mistakes) made by the learners in writing simple paragraphs. Many grammatical problems can be assigned as their carelessness because those should not have been problems anymore; the grammatical features

are academically believed as the basic ones, in fact. The problems frequently appeared in the students' writings and they are easily found in their spoken language.

Some students told that they did not know the correct grammatical features due to lack of knowledge and grammatical competency or they had already forgotten. The unexpected reality is not good for academic condition of EFL learning in Indonesia as many students of English Department of the teacher-training and education faculty do not have sufficient language awareness and linguistic competence. The students cannot integrate the knowledge of grammar learnt in *Grammar subjects* into writing skill as they are learning *Writing subjects*. Purposely, the offering of *Grammar subjects* in line with appropriate *Writing subjects* at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta is to enable learners to integrate the grammatical competence and language awareness into language skills.

As it has already been known, writing skill belongs to a complex-integrated skill since it needs grammatical competence, language awareness, and ideas to be communicated. As the candidates of EFL teachers, the English Department students should have sufficient grammatical competence and language awareness in order to support their language skills, particularly writing skill. These all need well-planned programs, curriculum, and learning facilities.

In addition, it should be better understood that teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Indonesia has academic and socio-grammatical specifications. The real language condition in Indonesia is that most EFL learners have already had and communicated in their own mother tongues and *bahasa Indonesia* as the national language. Therefore, English is academically and practically taught for multilingual learners. The unique socio-grammatical conditions need serious-academic attention in order to have better results of EFL learning in this country. Among the others, the grammar instruction of the foreign language is fundamental to build grammatical competency, language awareness, and communicative ability, as well. In accordance with this, the instructional processes of English grammar at university level, particularly at the study programs of English education, have academic and important roles in order to provide the learners with sufficient grammatical competency and language awareness on English.

Although the grammatical problems made by the students in oral-direct verbal communication are sometimes permissible, but they are not relatively allowed in written one; grammatical problems should be avoided in written language, in fact. Thus, it is highly reasonable to state that the students' grammatical problems in writing should be initially corrected and academically improved in appropriate ways.

This paper, developed based on a part of research results conducted in 2013/2014 academic year at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang, discusses *the forms and types of students' grammatical problems in writing simple paragraphs*. In addition, *the discussion continues to analyze whether the grammatical problems found in the learners' simple paragraphs can be academically assigned as lack of grammatical competency and/or their own language carelessness*. The data are students' grammatical problems found in their written simple paragraphs. The data were collected during the teaching-learning processes of *Writing II class* at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta in 2013. The data analysis presented in this paper is still preliminary which for a while focuses on the forms and types of students' grammatical problems and how they came to the problems.

B. Brief Review of Related Theories

1. Learning English Grammar for Indonesian Learners: Is it Necessary?

As linguistically known, the nature of English grammar and structure is concerned with the rules and systems on the level of sounds, words or lexicons, clauses and sentences, and meaning (see Lyons, 1990; Song, 2001). The nature is tied to a variety of features either universal or unique. If English grammar and the grammar of *bahasa Indonesia* are compared, for example, some differences as well as similarities are easily found. One of important

differences is that English is a *tensed language*, while *bahasa Indonesia* (and the majority of Malayan languages) are *tenseless language* (see Lyons, 1987; Jufrizal, 2010; Refnita, 2013a, b). Another difference can be seen on aspect, modality, and phrase structure. In English, aspect and modality are expressed in predicate; while in *bahasa Indonesia* they are simply expressed by means of lexical items. In addition, English phrase structure is arranged by having the modifier precede the modified items, while in *bahasa Indonesia* the modified item precedes the modifier (see further Lyons, 1990; Saeed, 1997; Jufrizal, 2010). Such grammatical differences may be parts of important reasons to say that learning EFL grammar is necessary for Indonesian learners.

In addition, Williams in Bygate et. al. (eds.) (1994:109–110) argues that there is a considerable difference between teaching grammar to non-native speakers and that to native speakers. Native speakers are already competent in their language varieties. They know the forms and the meanings of language; there is a form-function fusion for them. In teaching grammar to a native speaker of English, then, this communicative rule would not have to be taught – unless one wished to ensure awareness of it. The position of non-native speaker, however, is different. They would have to be taught the meaning associated with the structures. If learners are not taught or given the opportunity to learn, they will never know because the relationship between syntactic form and meaning is as arbitrary as that between lexis and meaning. Knowledge about the difference between *She didn't go* and *She doesn't go* needs to be possessed by non-native speakers because it is an important rule in communicative grammar. The possession of such knowledge helps people 'to say what they mean'.

Another important idea on the significance of teaching grammar in any language learning program, including the EFL learning in Indonesia, is presented by Tonkyn (in Bygate et.al (eds.), 1994:6). According to him, it is widely believed that a formal grammar instruction can help to prevent the premature fossilization which an excessive emphasis on the performance of communicative tasks may bring. Besides, it can assist learners, especially adults, to learn more rapidly and efficiently. It may happen because adults can better understand **Abstract** rules and draw logical conclusion for communicative purpose. This is really necessary for the English Department students of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta as they are trained to be professional EFL teachers.

Many similar reasons and psychological argumentations have been argued by linguists and learning methodologists saying that EFL learners, and of course Indonesian learners, cannot avoid the programs of grammar instructions. It becomes more necessary and academically needed for the students of the English teacher training and education, such the English Department of Bung Hatta University (see Refnita, 2013a). It is almost impossible for the students to have better English language skills if they do not have the grammatical competence and language awareness. The communicative competence and language skills are normally supported by good grammatical competence and language awareness, then.

2. The Language Awareness and Grammatical Competence in Writing

It is ideally and practically believed that grammar instructions (whatever the names for subject offered at the EFL learning at particular institutions) build the linguistic-grammatical competence and language awareness, as well to support the communicative competence performed in four language skills. Therefore, the instructional programs of English grammar, for instance, must have something to do with listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Well-planned grammatical instructions will give academic effects to better language awareness and performance in the four language skills. Among the four skills, grammar may have direct and close contribution to writing skill (see Uso-Juan et.al in Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (eds.), 2006:391; Frodesen in Celce-Murcia (ed.), 2001:233 – 239).

According to Leech (in Bygate et.al. (eds.), 1994:18), knowledge of language, especially grammar, needs to be possessed by a good language teacher. Accordingly, a 'model' teacher of languages ideally should: (i) be capable of putting across a sense of how grammar interacts with the lexicon as a communicative-cultural system (both 'communicativeness' and 'system' will

need independent attention); (ii) be able to analyze the grammatical problems the learners encounter; (iii) have the ability and confidence to evaluate the use of grammar, especially by learners, against criteria of accuracy, appropriateness and expressiveness; (iv) be aware of the contrastive relations between native language and foreign language; (v) understand and implement the processes of simplification by which overt knowledge of grammar can be best presented to learners at different stages of learning.

Language awareness and grammatical competence normally have significant contribution to all language skills (language performance), and they may give more meaningful supports to writing skill. According to Brown (2001), one category of principles of language learning and teaching is that how learners deal with complex linguistic systems, so called the linguistic principles. Ideally, the linguistic principles include native language effect, inter-language, and communicative competence. In accordance with this, a lot of grammatical features of English should be learned and known by the EFL learners in order to have language awareness and communicative competence. Language awareness (or language consciousness) is the speakers' psychological and personal condition by which they know and are able to use particular forms and grammatical constructions of languages in verbal communication. The grammatical competence and knowledge, in systematic-complex systems, naturally build the language awareness of speakers that lead them to be skillful users, both in oral and written communication (see further Brown, 2001; Yip in Odlin (ed.), 1994; Andrews in Bygate et.al. (eds.), 1994).

The ideas above imply that grammar and writing are in 'special' cooperation in which writing skill needs formal language patterns, standard grammar, and mechanics of writing. Linguistic competence is an umbrella concept that comprises basic elements of written communication such as vocabulary or lexicon, grammar rules, and conventions in mechanics (Uso-Juan, Martinez-Flor, and Palmer-Silveira in Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (eds.), 2006:391). These are all the features of language awareness that speakers have in acceptable language forms. Language awareness may be generally viewed as parts of speakers' internal knowledge about their language seen as psychological condition and readiness to have 'normal' language.

In addition, it is strongly argued that grammar in writing emphasizes that a focus on form in composition can help writers develop rich linguistic resources needed to express ideas effectively in addition to providing assistance in error correction. Then, it is necessary to pay attention to the following guideline in selecting texts and grammatical features in the grammar-writing instruction. The points of the guideline are: (i) the grammatical features should be appropriate for students' developmental stages; (ii) the grammatical features should reflect students' writing needs for the course or for future writing; (iii) when possible, assigned course readings should be sources of text analysis so that grammar focus is integrated with other pre-writing activities; (iv) the lessons should be generally be kept brief, especially for less advanced writers; (v) the instructor may want to enhance the text by underlining or bolding certain elements, especially those that are not very salient for some learners; and (vi) productive tasks should follow text analysis so that writers have opportunities to practice the explicit knowledge gained from noticing features in written texts and so that teachers are able to assess to some degree what students have learned from the analysis tasks (Frodesen in Celce-Murcia (ed.), 2001:238 – 239).

This article does not discuss all things about the interrelationship between grammatical features and writing skill, but the discussion focuses on the grammatical problems frequently found in writing produced by EFL learners at Bung Hatta University, Padang. It is academically believed that students' writings which are full of grammatical problems are not good for the success of EFL learning. In turn, the students' linguistic competence and language awareness on grammar will optimally develop their communicative competence, including writing skill. Linguistic competence and language awareness are parts of basic elements to build communicative competence and other relevant socio-cultural properties in having verbal communication. Thus, it is theoretically and academically necessary to develop and promote

Indonesian EFL learners' linguistic competence and language awareness on English grammar in order to have better writing skill.

C. Research Method

This research belongs to a descriptive-quantitative research. It was carried out in the odd semester of 2013/2014 academic year at the English Education Study Program of Teachers Training Faculty of Bung Hatta University. The population was all of the third semester students who were taking Writing II and Structure II subjects. The sample was 50% of the population (43 students). The data were collected through Writing test and interview with 3 students. The data and information analyzed and presented in this paper are still around 50% of the all data collected in this research. The data analysis was carried out by means of descriptive statistics in order to see the grammatical problems made by the students.

D. Data Analysis and Discussion

As mentioned above, there were 43 students (51.19% of population) used as the sample in this research. They were all the students who had taken *Structure I* and *Writing I* subjects and when this research was conducted, they were taking *Structure II* and *Writing II* subjects. It was academically assumed that they had had sufficient knowledge on *basic* English grammar and how to write simple and complex sentences in the foreign language. As the data presented in this paper, there were totally 602 sentences written by the 43 students in their simple paragraphs; the smallest number of sentences written by the students were 5 sentences and the largest one were 31. Therefore, the average number of sentences written was 14 sentences (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Sentences written by the students

| Written sentences | Sum |
|---------------------|-----|
| Total number | 602 |
| The smallest number | 5 |
| The largest number | 31 |
| The average number | 14 |

Based on the number of sentences written by the 43 students in the form of simple paragraphs above, it seems that they were fairly “productive” since there were averagely 14 sentences in one paragraph. The quantitative number, however, was not really supported by the quality of sentences. Most of their sentences were only in simple constructions; most students could not construct many complex sentences in their paragraphs as those are required in intermediate and advanced level of writing skills as at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta. In accordance with this, the fact told that students' ability to write grammatical-complex sentences was still low.

Further analysis, moreover, on the percentage of incorrect sentences (grammatical problems) even comes to a worse condition. There was one student who wrote five sentences, but none was grammatically right (100% incorrect). The lowest percentage of incorrect sentences written by each student was 14.29%. In other words, no single student wrote their sentences in simple paragraph without grammatical problems. This current condition is seriously bad and academically problematic seen from the ideal goals of grammar and writing instructions assigned at the English Department of university level. Basically of course, the students were in serious problems in understanding grammatical features and face practical difficulties in constructing grammatical sentences in writing expressions. It can be academically argued, as indicated by the data, that the students had not had “fair” grammatical competence and sufficient language awareness on EFL; they were presumably lack of grammatical competency, in nature.

What are the forms and types of students' grammatical problems in writing simple paragraphs? Quantitatively, there were 348 sentences (57.81%) which contained grammatical problems. Most of grammatical problems were in the type of misselection (145 sentences), the next type was miscellaneous (112 sentences), followed by omission (78 sentences), addition (13 sentences), and misplacement (7 sentences). Table 2 shows the types and sum of the grammatical problems.

Table 2: Students' grammatical problems

| No | Types | Sum |
|----|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | Omission | 78 sentences |
| 2 | Addition | 13 sentences |
| 3 | Misplacement | 7 sentences |
| 4 | Misselection | 145 sentences |
| 5 | Miscellaneous | 112 sentences |
| | <i>Total number:</i> | <i>348 sentences = 57.81%</i> |

As it was found, misselection was the most common types of grammatical problems made by the students. Some of the misselections can be categorized as "silly" mistakes and they must not be made by university students anymore. The followings are some examples of the misselection.

- (1) *My hometown in Pasaman.*
- (2) *To translated I used a dictionary.*
- (3) *She is work as a housewife.*
- (4) *I love they are so much.*
- (5) *I am a only child.*
- (6) *I couldn't follow Idul Fitri pray on the first lebaran day.*
- (7) *I choose English Department.*
- (8) *Study English is very amazing.*

Miscellaneous type was the second common grammatical problems made by students in their writings. This type of grammatical problems psychologically implies that the students were *careless*; they were not personally and psychologically ready to write well and to have good writings. It seems that they thought in their own L1 then wrote in English with less attention to English grammar. The followings are some examples of miscellaneous types of grammatical problems.

- (9) *She is always help me in a everytime.*
- (10) *My activity at home help my mother.*
- (11) *My mother woke me up and said there fire burn near beach.*
- (12) *My father name is Syarifuddin and he is worked in state employment.*
- (13) *Two of my brothers a student in senior high school and in elementary.*
- (14) *And my sister in the senior high school.*

In addition to the serious grammatical problems above, the followings are the examples of omission, the next type of grammatical problems made by the students in their simple paragraphs.

Missing article:

- (15) *I have big family.*
- (16) *He is entrepreneur.*
- (17) *My father is entrepreneur and my mother is housewife.*
- (18) *I think he is black sweet boy.*
- (19) *He works in Tabing as mechanic of excavator.*

Missing preposition:

- (20) *I tried to listen the music in English.*
- (21) *She was born in Kerinci, December 10th.*
- (22) *I was born July 26, 1994.*

Missing Possessives:

- (23) *My brother name is Wira.*
- (24) *My sister name is Felysha.*
- (25) *The second sister name is Dwi Yanti.*

Missing words:

- (26) *My mother also has her own .*
- (27) *So, when he talks about politic, I just silent.*
- (28) *In Padang just my parents, my second sister and her husband, and me.*

Missing *be*:

- (29) *My second brother still at home because he just two years old.*
- (30) *Now I live in Padang but my family still in Dharmasraya.*
- (31) *They studying at Islamic Boarding School in Bukittinggi.*

Omission, in the form of omitting articles, prepositions, possessives, words, and *be*, was also frequently made by EFL learners because most of the words belong to functional words that are not naturally used in learners' native languages. However, those types of omission should not have occurred anymore since they had learnt them in many subjects.

Addition is another type of grammatical problems which was also frequently made by the students. It seems that this type of grammatical problems was influenced by their language habits in using *particular* words in L1 or it is a type of language carelessness. The followings are the examples of addition made by students in their writings.

- (32) *He and his friend were a funny people.*
- (33) *I'll never forget about my last lebaran.*
- (34) *They are consist of 3 people and my grandmother and my uncle too.*
- (35) *I love her like as she loves me.*

The last type of grammatical problems made by students in their simple paragraphs is misplacement. Although this type was the lowest rank found in students' writings, it is still crucial. It may appear also as the grammatical interference of students' L1. These are the examples of misplacement found in students' paragraphs.

- (36) *My sister is a student college at Padang State University.*
- (37) *She is younger 4 years than my father.*
- (38) *We spent whole the day just for fun.*

The data above, at least, tell three serious-academic problems on the grammar instruction as the results of learning English grammar at high schools, and *Grammar I* subject they took before. First, it seems that basic-elementary features and patterns of English grammar were not successfully learnt. If the grammar instructions worked well at high school and in *Grammar I* subject, such unexpected misselections might not appear in nature. Second, it is reasonably supposed that the students had a "negative" opinion that grammar was not necessary in learning EFL; the most important thing is just say or write what you want to say and write. Of course, this non-educated idea is not expected, then. Third, the grammar instruction so far has not successfully built and developed sufficient students' grammatical competency and language awareness yet.

If it is so, do all forms and types of the students' grammatical problems indicate lack of grammatical competency or language carelessness? In order to have reasonable answers for this question, short interviews with three students (for a while) had been done. Based on the results of interview, it can be argued that the students' grammatical problems were mostly caused by lack of grammatical competence and language awareness in English. Consequently, the students could not write grammatically correct sentences as required; such kinds of ungrammatical sentences may come to problems in written English. In other words, it can be reasonably stated that the students were academically lack of grammatical competency, then.

In addition, the students frankly told that they did not pay attention to grammatical features of English while they were writing. They psychologically and cognitively thought in their mother tongues (L1), directly formulated their sentences in their native language, and practically wrote in English as they were able to. They focused more on ideas to be communicated, but they did not seriously think that English has particular grammatical rules for sentence construction. As the results, there were many ungrammatical sentences found in their paragraphs. For some cases, the students knew the correct grammatical features; they were practically careless, in nature. In this sense, it can be highly argued that the grammatical problems can be academically assigned as language carelessness. As a whole, it may be claimed that the forms and types of students' grammatical problems found in their writing are the result of both students' lack of grammatical competency and language carelessness.

E. Concluding Remarks

It is believed that the lack of grammatical competency and language carelessness may academically give "bad" effects to the quality of sentence constructions written by EFL learners, particularly in Indonesia. The lack of grammatical competency and language carelessness, of course, are not the expected condition in any programs of EFL learning. Particularly, writing skill needs sufficient language awareness and grammatical competency. In accordance with this, it is really suggested that all programs of English grammar and writing instructions should be addressed to build and develop students' grammatical competency and language awareness. By doing so, grammar instructions really help develop and improve students' linguistic and communicative competences which can be practically seen in writing and other language skills.

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