THE "VOICE" IN COMPOSITION: REVIEWING THE ESSENCE OF WRITING CULTURALLY IN ENGLISH FOR MINANGKABAU-INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Students who are studying English in the environment of EFL context, like those in Indonesia, usually feel afraid to write argumentatively and persuasively in the form of essay when they write about topics that are of sensitive issues to them. If they are brave to do so, they basically frame their thoughts from the angle of being an Indonesian who is filled with prescriptive cultural backgrounds. To be able to argue within their own ideas is what they are generally good the most, even though syntactically and grammatically their writing has certain level of linguistic deficiency. At this point, teaching these types of students to write within their own "voice" is what they need in order to reach the point of being able to express their thoughts. Other aspects of standard academic essay writing, especially in terms of grammar and vocabulary, should follow general concepts along the lines with their ability to express their thoughts. In this writing, holistic views toward the process of learning writing in an EFL context are briefly discussed. From the consulted literature on EFL studies, it can be concluded that considering grammar and vocabulary too much before the act of writing handicaps students' process in composing solid essay. The solution to this type of EFL pedagogical matter is to help them in letting go their "voice" in writing so that the essence of their writing becomes alive and communicative to their targeted readers; in other words, their writings speak beyond grammar.

Keywords: "Voice", Writing, Culture, Minangkabau, and EFL

Language is now seen as a great reservoir of categories and concepts, without sophisticated thinking would be impossible. This is largely because a common older view of language as a mere instrument for the expression of thought is no longer accepted –
William James Earle

Introduction

Research is an interesting activity done by scientists and scholars worldwide. It generally involves deep analysis and the use of specific data analysis in a spectrum of any given field of studies (Hubbuch 3; Kirszner 193; Veit 1-2; and Weidenborner 145). In this case, Composition studies within the view of Writing research is what the researcher does in writing this research article. Essentially, "writing research aims to help us understand writing more clearly or to teach writing more effectively and this is an enormous field with many unresolved issues and potential areas of inquiry" (Hyland 141). Thus, the topic about "voice" in academic writing becomes an interesting topic to be researched, especially it relates to the efforts of expanding English studies in Indonesia as a place of EFL learners. Therefore, the context of this article is framed within EFL writing. Research methodology that is being applied deals with research on EFL writing and to a certain degree, this research is conducted thoroughly and it uses four samples of students' writings from homogenous linguistic environment in the college.

EFL Writings

The context of English in Indonesia is known as EFL that is widely recognized by scholars in the world as English as a Foreign Language (Norland ix). In this context, Indonesia applies the learning and teaching process of English as that in the expanding circle. Aya Matsuda defines expanding circle as concept that recognizes English in a foreign language form, such as in "advertisements, store, and brand names and popular culture" (2). Most people in the expanding circle community do not use English in daily basis and they for the most part use English only for the purpose of trading or conducting international business. In essence, the general form of English that is accessible across the archipelago is in the written form. In line with this linguistic phenomenon and its relation the use of written language in social construction, writings too have forms. In particular, writings are considered to have genres as the representation of written forms. Genres of written language in English: (1) academic writing; (2) job-related writing; and (3) personal writing (Brown 219). Academic writing takes position as a demanding task for most students entering colleges or universities in Indonesia. From Aceh to Papua, all students are required to learn how to write well within the

spectrum of academic writing. However, given the actual condition that in the communities of where the students live do not speak English; therefore, the students face slow improvement in using English language, although in some places like Batam or Bali, most young children are prone to English because of the Western visitors and tourists in those areas. Essentially, "the ability to use language is the most distinctive human characteristics; and yet most people take this ability for granted, never considering its richness and complexity" (Bolton 21). In particular, this situation happens due to the lack of suitable teaching and learning process of EFL in most schools and universities in Indonesia.

In the context of EFL writing, what the students write is the core point to be considered if we want to claim ourselves that we already teach well. Ideas are related to the content of the students' writings. "…content is critical. […] But more than in other fields, so is the writing style in the paper itself. After all, Literature is, writing, much like science is the scientific method. Those attracted to literature should be extremely literate and literary themselves" (Nilson 226). With that in mind, to enable students to write their own ideas on texts and, at the same time enable them to produce their own literature are keys to bring the students to be literate in English. Unfortunately, the essential part of teaching and learning English in Indonesia as a country in Asia is still far to be reached. Beryl Exley states that "communicative paradigm of the modern English teaching methodology [in most Asian countries] still fails and the curriculum is too overwhelmed with memorisation focus than analytical thinking" (3). Exley tries to tell us that Indonesian education puts emphasis too much on memory than on being critical to the use of English as a language of communication in the world.

Anita Lie discussing her ideas on Teaching and Learning Program Guidelines at the 35th Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Centre in Singapore mentions that two of the guidelines are: firstly, meaning is determined by language as well as situational scope and context; and secondly, learner's motivation is a determining factor in the success of learning the target language (83). Thus, the understanding of how meaning is constructed in the process of English teaching and learning, and to what level do the students have in learning English are in this case influential points in the process of teaching EFL writings in Indonesia.

Although Indonesian government applies the concept of character building, or moral character, as the images of national education; letting go the important aspect of learning language is basically a missing picture of strong foundation for the creating a character-based society. In the context of composition, "moral character referred to the trustworthiness of the speaker, or the speaker's ability to convince those hearing the speech that he was telling the truth as he understood it" (Cutbirth 83). To teach students to have certain characters would be impossible unless they learn how to use language efficiently and effectively as they will use language in the form of tools. Besides, young generation or students today are in need of proper usage of language in order to establish better condition of their country and nationality.

When we look at schools, colleges, and universities in Indonesia, we already know well that all teachers can teach English well because they have been tested under the national teacher certification program. However, the question is in what extent we can communicate what we need to the students after learning their writings? James A. Berlin theorizes that "everyone teaches the process of writing, but everyone does not teach the same process" (249). The variety of teaching process—as the instructional learning process in all English classrooms in Indonesia—produces many "voices" in the students' writings. In the end, the diversity of "voices" influences how EFL writings should be assessed.

EFL Writings Assessment: Grammar and Error Correction

A traditional method of teaching writing to EFL students is known as grammar and error correction. We used to teach students to write by focusing too much on grammatical correctness. Sometimes, we skip the essential part of the students' writings that basically deserves top priority to be assessed. ideas. Ideas can be found on the clarity of the sentences. However, this method wastes students' time. They will be good in grammar, but they will be lacking much on the aspect of producing their very own written products. "Language acquisition theory implies that teaching grammar directly will not be effective except perhaps in special cases. However, it is common practice in both ESL classes and mainstream composition classes to correct errors in written texts. Is this an effective practice?" (Edlund 381). To this time in 2015, the answer to this question is generally relative; depending on how we look at this matter and in what way we assess the matter exponentially.

EFL students' voices are also influenced by the types of the texts that the students read. The texts will become their background knowledge unconsciously. Jennifer Lynn Craig emphasized that "when we ask students to write and to present in substantive ways they need material about which to write or present. It is preferable if this material is meaningful or at least interesting to the student and also sufficiently complex to require critical thinking" (97). The truth of what happens is that we tend to choose books which we consider to be good as the learning materials, but we rarely assess the books thoroughly. All what we bring to the class

is what will become the students' knowledge. Eventually, it will influence the students' writings and their qualities. Elaine Brooks mentions that students need more time allocated to write their ideas (320). Most of the time, students who have difficulties are those who have low reading habits. At the same time, we often time focus on finding errors in their writing to make their writing better; however, this process is by any means far from what it means to teach.

Review Of Related Theories

The "Voice" in Writing

An interesting view at the present time about English learning is that native and non-native speakers of English are on the same boat on the basis of learning English, but it is only in the non-native speakers of English learn English as fulfilling the demands to master an international language. "...the assumptions that non-native English speakers learn English in order to communicate with native English speakers and learn about their culture does not always hold true anymore" (Matsuda 4). At this point, Indonesian students individually have their own reasons and intentions to learn English. For some of them, learning English is a required subject in schools; meanwhile, the rest of them learn English because they need it. The only problem of learning English, especially when it comes to learning how to produce one's own words and thoughts clearly in English, is that the English instructors often time push their thought to the students. What is best according to the instructor is what is best for the students. As a matter of fact, this picture needs to be avoided at all cost.

Students are the ones who learn English in the classrooms; therefore, after knowing that they have learned English for more than six years since elementary schools, it is time for us to help them produce their own English language within the two active skills: speaking and writing. For the other two skills—reading and listening, the students have to expand these skills by having rigorous practices inside and outside the classrooms. Like what Paulo Freire clearly highlights, "the command of reading and writing is achieved beginning with words and themes meaningful to the common experience of those becoming literate, and not with words and themes linked only to the experience of the educator" (Giroux 42). Only in writing, the students can feel the power of learning a language. Barry Brummett states that power in writing means "the ability to control events and meanings" (4). This type of power is the thing that becomes the idea of having a "voice" in writing in the context of EFL classrooms.

Cultural Writing

An interesting view of writing in EFL settings is related to the existence of cultural images in the students' voices and ideas reflected in their writings. In this context, "...the definition of culture is communication, as culture comprises the knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices that are constantly transmitted in conversation, written communication, and non-verbal behaviour" (Gallois 22). Besides, "...the term culture has diverse and disparate definitions that deal with forms of speech acts, rhetorical structure of text, social organizations, and knowledge constructs" (Hikel 1). In other words, culture is embedded and linguistically inserted in EFL students' writings. The influence of the cultures of where the students live makes their writings become cultural writings.

The creation processes of cultural writings tend to show the images of the students' behaviour in writing their works. "Behaviourists believed that language is learned like anything else. Learning depends on the response of the individual to the environment" (Freeman 2). For example, the students live in Minangkabau society will very likely produce writings that have embedded Minangkabau cultures in their writings. If these things cannot be found explicitly, they usually are embedded implicitly. In the teaching process of EFL writings, confusion might happen accidentally. Andy Kirkpatrick mentions that "the use of schemas that are appropriate in one culture but inappropriate or unusual when transferred into another can lead to misunderstanding" (25). Students' confusion happens due to their efforts to swift from the usage of a language in one culture to a usage of another language within another culture. This situation is also triggered by the selection of reading materials in such classrooms. Therefore, "in the ESL/EFL classrooms, instructors must be particularly sensitive to reading problems that result from the implicit cultural knowledge presupposed by a text" (Lin 191). Not only has such misunderstanding happened, the new construction of ideas about a particular culture from English-speaking context has also happened at the same time in the minds of the students. This situation will lead to the burdens of complexity to write within one's own "voice" in writings.

Individual-based Cultural Writings in English

Learning English writings in EFL classrooms involves the existence of the active cultures in the minds of the students. The student writers and expert writers are indeed different, although they come from

the same EFL background. "The different between student and expert writers is that the experts know about, and are capable of shifting to, [non-preferred] strategies when their most comfortable and preferred strategies do not work" (Horning 202). It means that the expert writers have flexibility in the process of producing their works, while the student writers might probably be enchained to learning mode and then to producing their writings when they are read. In Indonesia, teaching writing by focusing too much on grammar and fill-in-the-blank exercises is making the teaching efforts far from its goals. In fact, "reflecting on how the grammar-and-drill-focused tradition of writing instruction failed to elicit real communication between real writers and readers..." (József 16) shows that grammar is the handicap in learning writing. Putting grammar in the end could lead the students to let go their voices clearly.

The important view of writing and texts, as the important thing that the students need to know, can be read as in the following statement:

...students should understand that texts are not objective and transparent, written only to reveal certain viewpoints or information. Texts are also representational. They display our identities, values, and interests. It is advisable, therefore, for students to engage with the text to accomplish their preferred interests rather than let the dominant conventions represent their values according to their choosing (Canagarajah 176).

Canagarajah has briefly mentioned that the "interests" of the students in texts are the crucial aspect to consider; meanwhile, "dominant conventions" as in the existing cultures should be directed to a more flexible mode. In learning how to write, essentially, to consider such "interests" is a must, so that the students can release their own voices. "The ultimate goal of learning to write is, for most students, to be able to participate fully in many aspects of society beyond school, and for some, to pursue careers that involve extensive writing" (Weigle 4). In the end, when the students have learned how to write well in English by using their very own thoughts and ideas, the voices reflected in their writings will help them achieve a better state of a learned and educated man in the archipelago and in the world wherever they live and make the best endeavours.

Data Analysis And Discussion

The researcher categorizes this research as qualitative, but the technique, theory, and method applied are related to Composition research. Ken Hyland clearly mentions that "a major source of data for writing research is writing itself: the use of texts as objects of study" (149). He also mentions that what defines as composition research is the researcher uses texts as a form of "study of authentic examples of writing used in a natural context" (145). This research uses combination of ideas existing in linguistic, literature, and pedagogy or teaching. The spectrum of analysis done in this research applies the EFL point of view. The observation method involves the researcher in watching, recording, and analysing events of interest (Blaxter 178). Students' writings produced in Writing 1 class are briefly examined and three samples had been taken for the purpose of representing the overall data. Most writings resemble similar patterns and as a result, the researcher selects three writings as samples to be discussed in this research article.

In relation to the Composition research, Gesa Kirsch and Patricia Sullivan point out that "writing is what differentiates composition studies from other fields of inquiry and unites its practitioners as a research community" (1). They also mention that "...in composition studies, researchers encounter writing immediately as well as inevitably" (1). Source of data in this research are paragraph writings done by students enrolling in Writing 1 course. All students are registered as the 2014 students; therefore, the suitable format of the source of data in this research is paragraph writings. Samples that are being used in writing this research report were written in mid-term test. It means that the source of data is valid, authentic, and reliable. To see the students' "voice", the researcher decides to use the students' mid-term test because such works are "fresh."

Data Analysis on Minangkabau-Indonesian EFL Students' Writings

In this part of discussion session, the researcher presents three samples of students' writings. From all floors of data, these three paragraph writings are among the highest-score writings, although to some degree, grammar and syntactical acumens need further adjustments.

Student's Writing Sample 1

Student' Name: Laila Septia Hidayati; Reg. No.: 14040077

Wrote on April 30, 2015 in Writing 1 Course. Class Session: 2014 C

English Education Department of STKIP PGRI Sumatera Barat

Idul Fitri Day

Idul Fitri Day is a special day for me for gathering with family. We do a lot of things, such as eating, praying, and visiting my neighbour and my friends. I love that day very much. First lebaran day, I am going to mosque for prayed idul fitri. After that I hear khotbah. Resounded in mosque. Then I and family to forgive with my parent, brothers, friends, sisters, cousins, and

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other. Next, I am back to home for eat with big family in situation eat we are happyfully together. After eat, in situation eat we eat breads lebaran. Second lebaran day, I visit in home grandmother with family arrived in there, we are allready waited grandmother with cookie lebaran and syrup favorite me. I and family very happy in home grandmother until afternoon. Third lebaran day, I tour Aia Batumbuak with famiy and my sister's husband for enjoy beauty tea garden and next we are trip exted, in trip we see spectator thing very beautiful lake on. Finnaly, my family and I enjoy the Idul Fitri day. I will wait the next Idul Fitri day.

In Sample 1 above, we can see that the students have many grammatical and other linguistic problems. However, the student has strong voices because she clearly depicts her experiences during the Ramadhan month. Some vocabularies that exist in her first language—Bahasa Indonesia—exist as well in English, such as *Idul Fitri, lebaran,* and *khotbah.* The vivid images are clear from her writing, but to make such writing excellent, of course, it needs editing and even more, revision. The interesting side of this writing is the genuinity. She can use local place and chronologically tells her experiences from first, second, and third day of the *Idul Fitri* day.

Student's Writing Sample 2
Student' Name: Vebi Yuliska; Reg. No.: 14040125
Wrote on April 4, 2015 in Writing 1 Course, Class Session: 2014 D
English Education Department of STKIP PGRI Sumatera Barat
The Real Happiness for Me
When somebody talks about happiness, you may imagine something that would makes you smile without any problems. You can smile when you meet your old friends or when you get money. But, it does not mean you are happy. happiness means you will feel good whether the condition it is not good at all but you can stay with people that you love. that is the happiness. You have someone that would never betrayal you, always believe in you like parents to their children, forgive all your mistakes, support you, and loyalty. My parents do that things to me, I am not a perfect daughter, I did a lot of mistakes from the beginning, I hurt them, but they are forgive me. still take care of me, still do their best for my education, and support me as well. That is the real happiness means for me. All in all, happiness is not about how long you can smile, how many money do you have, how pretty you are or when you eat your favorite dish, it is all about that smile on the face of people that you love and love you too.

Sample 2 shows how a student delivers her thoughts, feelings, and even advices through the use of "you" to directly communicate to the readers. In academic writing, this type of style might be avoided, but if we see it through writing as a means of achieving that transferred voice, she has written the piece very good. If we look at her writings, she tries to appeal the readers by using a well-organized paragraph. She opened her paragraph with a topic sentence and continuously supported it by adding more persuasive forms of sentences until the end. Her words reflect how careful she chose her words, although, as usual, grammatically wise, such writing needs editing to make it better. The way she puts herself in her writing and shares the feeling through writing has indeed made her writing having such "voice."

Student's Writing Sample 3
Student' Name: Huria Darman; Reg. No.: 14040171
Wrote on April 7, 2015 in Writing 1 Course, Class Session: 2014 D
English Education Department of STKIP PGRI Sumatera Barat
At My Worst
We are all as human being must be having our ups and downs. Each people have so many different ways in expressing their feelings, and especially when it comes to sadness. In this chance, I am going to to write down about the best way that i usually do in expressing mine whenever i feel down. Everytime I feel sad, that only thing that I would do is I should be around people or at least I should have someone to talk to; it can make me feel so much better because by sharing, every problem that we have it would be solved easily no matter how hard it is. Most people nowadays will choose to be alone and listening to sad music and i used to be like that but believe me nothing good about being alone in your worst. I used to think that being alone was the only way but no it was the worst way that i have ever chosen. So, from now you better change the way you think like I did.

Sample 3 shows a slightly different form. Unlike Sample 1 and 2, Sample 3 presents the way how such student communicates orally to the readers. In her writing, she uses the expression like, "*I am going to to write down about....*" The words she chose mostly are in the form of general words, such as *people, so many, every problem, most people*, and *everytime*. Semantically, she can even make her writing better if she avoids the usage of such words, but considering that she is enrolling in the second semester; therefore, the researcher considers that this writing is worth good score. She has something to say in her writing to the readers. From all three samples of students' paragraph writings above; we can see that actually the EFL students have something to say in their writings. This "something" is what compositionists call as "voice" in writing. Sample 1, 2, and 3 clearly give us clue that achieving correctness in writing, especially dealing with grammar, is good; however, writing within one's own voices is extremely excellent. Such writing is what makes the writer produces brilliant works.

Conclusion And Suggestion

Traditionally, students write only for feeding in the teachers' aptitude of fulfilling the required curriculum, while the very essence of the students' voices is left behind in the English teaching and learning process. Aya Matsuda and Patricia Friedrich mention that the essence of teaching to write well in English means "...to provide opportunities for students to interact with English users from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds" (25). This hope would be difficult if we do not teach writing by lifting out the students' background cultures. "In EFL classrooms, as we teach the language, we would automatically teach culture" (Cakir 156). The point to be considered is that to recognize the students' voices mean to recognize the essence of writing with hearts, or writing, beyond grammar.

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