THE CAUSES OF EFL STUDENTS’ DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

For many EFL students, learning to write in English is a difficult and challenging task. Few EFL students have much experience writing in English. Therefore, many students face many difficulties in their writing. There are, of course, many possible causes why a student may experience difficulty learning to write. Some of the problems may be due to factors intrinsic to the student, while others are due to outside influences. The factors intrinsic to the learner are such as affective response to failure, motivation, anxiety over expression, and other emotional factors. EFL students’ native language literacy backgrounds and experiences are also very important in the development of their writing. The outside influences, teaching method is one of the most powerful. Besides that, there are potential causes of learning problems in English writing such as time allocated for learning, language ability, phonological awareness, and social or cultural disadvantage.

Keywords: Causes, Difficulties, Writing, English

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English is used by all people worldwide because of the ongoing advances in technology such as internet and other businesses. English also plays an important role in education and students are expected to use it effectively. English is not used by most people in this country. It is regarded as a foreign rather than a second language for them. Therefore, teaching English in Indonesia is challenging. Many students are able to understand the language, but most of the students face the problem of communicating their ideas effectively. For instance, the problem is the lack of both: the adequate stock of English vocabulary and creativity in writing. It is evident that writing is the biggest challenge for many students.

Learning to write in a new language takes a lot of effort because the kind of writing taught to these students is less creative and structure oriented. Compared to other skills, writing is an intricate and complex task. It is the most difficult of all the language abilities to acquire. The students face difficulties in expressing themselves in writing, especially, since the inception of the audio-lingual movement in which the oral skills have received major attention and writing has been considered less important (Harmer, 2007). Learning to write does not confine to just what is happening in the writer’s state of mind, but social interaction is also a key to learn how to write successfully. Furthermore, to ensure that the teaching of EFL writing is going to the right direction, English teachers must be aware of recent EFL writing theories and practices. Despite numerous approaches to the teaching of writing have evolved from different methods, tackling EFL writing is still one of the most challenging areas for teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to review theories of EFL writing. Specifically, this paper focuses on the causes of difficulties encountered by EFL students with some recommendations to boost effort to developing the students writing skills for national and global benefits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Writing

Writing is a crucial component of language performances. English writing in both educational and professional settings is increasingly important in countries of non-native speakers of English (Leki, 2001).
However, writing is a complex activity which reflects the writer’s communicative skills which is difficult to develop and learn, especially in an EFL context. EFL writing is as a multi-dimensional process affected by a number of linguistic and contextual factors; EFL linguistic proficiency, instructional, psychological, and sociocultural issues. If these factors are well-addressed, this will make writing an easy experience. L2 writing has always been considered an important skill in teaching and learning. According to Rao (2007) that EFL writing is useful in two respects: First, it motivates the students’ thinking, organizing ideas, and developing their ability to summarize, analyze, and criticize. Second, it strengthens the students to get learning, thinking, and reflecting on the English language.

There are number of research papers about writing difficulties faced by L2 learners. For instance, there were some difficulties which Arab learners faced when learning to write English successfully (Al-Gharabally, 2015). L2 learners were often overwhelmed when asked to complete a writing task. Even at the beginning, some learners would have difficulty getting started. While some fluent adult writers thought of writing as a difficult process, L2 learners should not initially have the same attitude and the teacher should try to ensure that writing was not seen as a frustrating and unrewarding skill. On contrary, learners should be encouraged to feel that writing was an important and effective means of self-expression, communication, and information gathering. In addition, other studies asserted that Tahvildar & Zade (2013) had a purpose to utilize analytic techniques to learn more about EFL teaching or assessing of writing and to develop a contour for an effective writing teacher in an EFL setting. Previously, they tried to investigate about the various writing skills which were difficult for Iranian EFL students. Moreover, Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh (2007) concerned with EFL writing problems at the university level, trying to point out the major difficulties with which Iranian students faced when writing their reports. They found that Iranian EFL medical students had problem both in language and writing skills, but with a higher percentage of problem in writing skills. Although grammar, vocabulary and syntax were essential for a well written report, other more important areas were significant as well. Language accuracy, although very significant could not alone result in effective writing; what the students need was also writing skills.

Writing Difficulties
Writing is an important but difficult skill to acquire, a communication skill which is essential in today’s information society. The level of difficulty is significantly higher when a foreign language is involved. Differences in the language structures, the manner of expressing thoughts, writing styles, and other culturally varying factors greatly affect the writing of foreign language learners. Likewise, writing is a complex process that allows learners to explore thoughts and makes them visible and concrete. It encourages thinking and learning, because it motivates communication and makes ideas available for reflection. When ideas are written down, they can be examined, reconsidered, added, rearranged, omitted or changed. Novice learners, however, need to practice writing that involves reproducing learned material in order to learn writing conventions of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical agreements.

Hadifield (1992) noted three areas of difficulties for the learners in relation to the productive skill of writing. First, the writer cannot consult the reader, for the audience is not immediately present as in the case with speaking. Second, the learners suffer from linguistic difficulty in that language used in speech is not the same as writing. The difficulty is more evident for EFL students who are unaware of the discourse patterns inherent in particular types of writing. The last difficulty is cognitive, this relates to the ability to organize ideas on the paper. In addition, writing is frequently a difficult skill for any language user, which is to say that writing presents a fairly challenging task for both native and non-native speakers. For English as a second language, ESL students, it seems fair to say that writing academic papers is particularly difficult (Kroll, 1990).

DISCUSSION
Byrne (1988) classifies the writing complexities into psychological, linguistic, and cognitive problems. There are some causes and contexts lying behind these organizational problems. At the psychological
level, the students faced a number of challenges including lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, and writing anxiety.

**Psychological Problems**

Davis (1998) states that the students will be encouraged to write if writing tasks motivate them and keep them interested. The desire on the part of the writer to communicate something is very important because it is much more difficult for students to write about something they have no interest in. Coupled with Byrne (1988), he believes that most of writers write less well if they are obliged to write about something that they do not want to write about. So then, the students’ motivation is said to strongly relate to how the students go about acquiring writing knowledge. Lavelle & Zuercher (2001) explain that writer’ intentions and beliefs about functions of writing and situations influence writing outcomes. The students who see the task as a whole are eager to learn and willing to engage in higher level of cognitive skills. Whereas those who just want to finish the task assigned, their learning strategies will be mainly based on knowledge telling and memorization.

The students with learning difficulties are not motivated to write in English for a number of possible reasons. First, physical condition means the atmosphere in class. Particularly, they are taught in a large class; overcrowded with too many students. Second, their English teachers use traditional teaching techniques such as methods of teaching English included the medium of instructions and using Indonesian in English classes. Therefore, this lack of motivation can have a strong negative effect on the students’ development in writing English and their low motivational intensity contribute to the students’ vocabulary problems in writing (Al-Khasawneh, 2010).

Accordingly, motivation has long been identified as one of the main factors affecting English language learning (Gardner, 1985). When the students have intrinsic motivation, they have the internal desire to learn and they do not have the need for external outcomes. Therefore, intrinsic motivation pushes the students to learn without rewards, because the need is innate or come from inside or depends on their own will. Spolsky (1990) stated that motivated students are likely to learn more and learn more quickly than students who are less motivated. In a particular learning situation, the students who are less motivated are likely to lose their attention, misbehave and cause discipline problems. On the contrary, the students who are more highly motivated will participate actively and pay more attention to a certain learning task or activity.

Afterward, the students’ lack of self-confidence could be ascribed to a number of socio-cultural issues. First, parents’ culture of control and power might be a contributing factor as they indirectly implant a lack of self-confidence in their children. Besides, the students frequently have a culture of dependence on someone else to tell them what to do. Independence in study is an uncommon culture. All these factors might be the original source of lacking self-confidence among the students. The culture will somehow influence the way for the students relate to their teachers in classroom settings. The teachers are often perceived as knowledgeable. Therefore, the students need to believe in what they say. This teacher authority is much likely to promote teacher-centered classroom so that the students are very passive especially in the presence of their authority individuals. They get used to wait for teachers to transfer knowledge to them and instruct them what to do. They seldom participate in any activities to promote critical thinking necessary in learning process. Consequently, the students report negative attitudes towards writing as a difficult subject. These factors are similar to the factors revealed by Holliday (1996) as teaching spectacle.

Likewise, it is underscored that writing multiple drafts, putting emphasis on the publication of student writers work, and the teachers’ comments that focused more on content and organization than on grammatical errors helped them produce better pieces of written composition and develop more self-confidence in writing (Tyson, 1997). Hopefully, when the students are self-confident or competent in their reading and writing skills, they are able to adapt the new teaching or learning methods quickly. For this reason, a psychologically supportive and nurturing learning environment is needed to boost the students’ self-confidence and their psychological challenges.
Furthermore, writing anxiety is said to negatively influence both the learners’ motivation (Cheng, 2002) and their academic achievement (Macintyre, Noel & Clement, 1997). Their research has shown that high apprehensive writers, in comparison with other low apprehensive ones, tend to stop more while writing and are less concerned with planning the overall structure of their writing. Data revealed a number of causes that might have contributed to the students’ writing anxiety such as lack of written feedback, negative oral criticism, working under time pressure, and writing about difficult topics. In reference to feedback, it was shown that the peer feedback group was significantly less writing anxiety than the teacher feedback (Rose, 1985). It has been revealed that EFL students perceive peer feedback is ineffective to help improve their writing skills. The students often think that they do not have experience and expertise to offer valuable feedback, and that only teacher can give valuable comments (Peyton et al, 1994). Even if there are students who can give feedback to their peers, what is given by students often focuses more on formal correctness such as spelling, grammar, and so on. The students need positive effective feedback from their foreign language teachers as a psychological therapy to stimulate them to maintain their motivation to continue and develop their writing skill. The teachers have to look for positives as well as negatives in writing. They should not pass judgment on its quality unless they are examiners and not teachers because good writing ability is highly sought by examiners (Chasten, 1988). As well as, Byrne (1988) states that if we are truly readers rather than judges, we should perhaps look not so much at what the learners have failed to achieve but rather at what they actually succeeded in doing. This might help the students to appreciate receiving comments and use them in their revisions. To motivate the students, the teachers should include comments of praise and encouragement in their written feedback.

In addition, it is implied that writer’s block that leads to their anxiety in writing may be due to the students’ writing under time pressure (Lee, 2006). In the process approach to teaching writing, the quality of the students’ written work can be affected by the amount of time that they are allowed. Writing, which is an important part of language learning, is essentially a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topics. Time may also be a key factor in producing a text with full of control over organization and coherence. As a result, many students and teachers feel that writing under time pressure is a very unnatural situation and perhaps cannot lead them to produce compositions that are truly representative of their capabilities (Kroll, 1990).

**Linguistic Problems**

When EFL students are writing in the target language they frequently face a triple challenge: they must master the content and concepts in English, write through a language which they may not fully command and within a cultural context that is completely different from their own (Heaton, 1979). Furthermore, some of the topics that EFL students are required to write are too difficult, for the majority of these students are still struggling with and worried about composing complete sentences. So, they are all the time wrestling with a different language and a different way to express ideas and feelings on a paper. When writing in English, they encounter not only the struggles that writers usually face, but also the challenges for working in a language in which they are not proficient. Thus, these students are often afraid to write and are reluctant to write. Many students abandon topics of interest because they are unable to express themselves in adequate English; others are preoccupied with producing correct English and will write only whatever they are sure in terms of grammar and syntax or they sometimes just copy from whatever sources they have just read that are relevant to their subjects. Due to limited English vocabulary and grammar students are unable to convey their ideas well, thus affecting the quality and content of their writing.

Among the many language difficulties the students initially encountered were those related to vocabulary like spelling and word choice. They could not spell the words, could not know their meaning or identify their sound representations, and did not know the English term. Students found themselves using a limited number of words again and again. One reason for the limited variety of words could be a difference between English and Indonesian. If the students think in Indonesian even partially, when writing in English, they tend to use a very limited number of corresponding English words and
expressions even if they try to translate; there are not always equivalents from one to another. Apparently, having a good knowledge of grammar does not mean that one can use those structures well. Still a lot of students showed many grammatical errors in their writing; the most frequently reported error category was subject-verb agreement (Afrin, 2016)

Cognitive Problems
There may be a number of reasons for the causes of these cognitive problems. One of them is lack of extensive reading. We believe that erecting the link between reading and writing would make better for the students’ writing assignments. With this in mind, the language skills (reading and writing) are both processes of making meaning that involve similar patterns of thinking and similar linguistic components. Both skills trigger schemata about the language, content and form of the topic. They both lead to the exploration of these schemata in discovering meaning (Leki, 1993). Both readers and writers have some kind of drafts of meaning in their minds as they start to read or write. Zamel (1992) also pointed out that reading and writing are both acts of knowing and competence and enhance one another. Previous knowledge plays an important role in one’s comprehension and composition (Hinkel, 2004). Gaining previous knowledge about general issues enables the students to compose an essay about a topic, for example, in which they might be interested. Previous knowledge about written English is thought to be one among other influential factors in the students’ success.

In addition, the students lack available writing resources. Though, there are many English printed materials and online learning resources where the students can get access to, there is limited number of writing resources and if there is any, it has not been really used by the students due to several reasons. First, many English books available in school library are mainly about grammar, vocabulary, and reading. There may be instances where writing books are ordered but after they have been put on the shelves, they will remain untouched because they are not needed.

Learning resources is important in providing rich input for the students. Among useful resources that the students can get access are materials in the school library such as books, journal online, writing software to help the students edit their work in terms of vocabulary choice and grammar. It is also suggested that peers and teachers are crucial to the development of the students’ writing performance because through interaction, the students get feedback and comments which foster problem solving skills necessary in writing.

The last, the students lack training and practice. Learning a second or foreign language is different from acquiring a first language in many perspectives. Williams (2005) explains that the students need time to process and explore the new language by themselves as they learn. Writing skill in particular, has its own rules and conventions, and it is difficult to learn in a short period of time. He also states that second or foreign language learning takes a long process, for many L2 students the process never ends. Though L2 writers have mastered some words and structures of the target language, they are still somewhere in the course of their learning process of adding new knowledge and becoming more fluent in that knowledge. Therefore, the students should be provided with opportunities to practice writing both inside and outside classroom contexts.

Writing, like any exercise, becomes easier and easier when done every day; writers get into a rhythm and find a stride. Kroll (1993) suggested that because non-native speakers have particular difficulty with the code of English, extending the amount of time allotted to write may affect the level of mastery over the different text levels. As well as, Grab and Kaplan (1996) believed that writing does not come naturally but rather gained through continuous effort and much practice. They also added that the best ways to learn any skill would be to practice it. To become a good driver, the best way is to drive. Similarity, to become a proficient writer, the best way is again to writing a lot.

CONCLUSION
There are some causes of writing complexities; in essence, psychological, linguistic, and cognitive problems. At the psychological level, the students faced a number of challenges including lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, and writing anxiety. To be able to write, the students need two kinds
of knowledge: linguistic and strategic. Linguistic knowledge includes knowledge of vocabulary, sentence structure, genre of English, and so on. More importantly, writing with clarity of meaning was probably challenging than written style. Strategic knowledge, on the other hand, refers to efforts that the students made to overcome their writing difficulties. Some other useful strategies employed by EFL students while writing are managing time effectively, asking for help and feedback. The teachers have to frame the teaching practices according to the quests of learner centered education and collaborative learning, where the teachers act as facilitators and organizers of writing experiences and enable students to develop effective strategies. It is suggested that the teachers also should be trained to use different classroom interaction techniques and teaching methods such as pair work and group work, peer-review, and any other related techniques. Moreover, the teachers should be acquainted with using technology in the classroom to help the students with different learning styles learn efficiently. Likewise, the teachers should be engaged in conducting research in general and action research in particular where they can find the students’ weakness areas and try to improve them. Thus, more research into the writing ability of these students is needed to identify means of developing the skills needed to effectively produce English writings of adequate quality.

REFERENCES


