The Process and Problems of EFL Learners in English Writing: A Case Study in International Class

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Abstract
The objectives of the study were to investigate the process of English writing from students of undergraduate international class, to describe problems faced by students in writing English, and to find out the factors which inhibit and improve their writing skills. There were six female respondents in international class. The study used documentation from the students’ work, open-ended questionnaire and interview as the instruments for data gathering. All the data were analyzed by using descriptive qualitative approach. The results of this study showed that all students used four stages in the process of English writing: planning, drafting, editing and final revision. The students’ English writing problems covered content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanic. The factors which inhibit them in writing English included not being confident in writing English, not mastering grammar and vocabulary, and lack of practice in writing. The aspects which encourage them to write English were due to the demands as international class students, watching English movie, reading English books or journals, listening English songs and having ambition to acquire scholarship overseas.

Keywords
EFL learners
English writing
international class

Ethical Lingua
Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020
ISSN 2355-3448 (Print)
ISSN 2540-9190 (Online)

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Article’s History
Submitted 22 Sept. 2020
Revised 7 October 2020
Accepted 7 October 2020

DOI
10.30605/25409190.215

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Writing skill is considered the most difficult skill in language learning (Xin, 2007). This is the most difficult skill to learn for students (Shapo, Walter & Fajans, 1995) even for students in international class where they have to write their final project in English. In international class, all the teaching learning process, class activities and all assignment should be in English. However, writing skills, particularly writing in English, is still neglected (Coker & Ritchey, 2015)

Writing is considered a challenging task. It is an individual, private or solitary activity (Di Loreto & McDonough, 2013). It is challenging because this skill needs a long process. According to Nation (2008) the best way to write is acknowledging that the process needs several steps to produce a written product. Therefore, learning to write in foreign or second language is not simple matter (Hyland, 1989). Students need to master both linguistic aspects and attitude such as willingness to practice several times in the process of writing. This process might be boring for some students. According to Hampton (1989), writing skills are specific abilities which help authors put their ideas into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message. The writer has to consider his/her readers. Since writing is a process of encoding carried out with a reader in mind (Di Loreto & McDonough, 2013). The writer conveys messages using letters and symbols which covers the aspect of content, organization, originality, style, fluency, accuracy and the appropriate use of rhetorical forms of discourse (Spratt, Pulverness, & Williams, 2005).

According to Harmer (2014), there are four stages in writing process. Planning stage is where students decide what to write, which is followed by drafting, which is the first piece of writing written by students. Editing is the third stage. This is a process of reflection and revision of the draft they have written, and the last final step is final revision, in which they have the final version to be read by readers. In addition, Alodwan & Ibnian (2014) argued that the process of writing covers prewriting, drafting, revision, editing and publishing.

The research in the area of EFL writing can be categorized into three major themes: research focusing on writing process, writing products, and genre-based approach (Fatimah & Masduqi, 2017). Many Indonesian scholars have explored the writing skills from different perspectives and different context. Aunurrahman (2019) found that undergraduate students in Pontianak experienced writing anxiety. Rahmatunisa (2015) found that undergraduate students in Jakarta encountered various problems in writing. Ratnawati, Yuliasri, & Hartono (2018) discovered that undergraduate students in West Java also encountered difficulties in their academic writing. Furthermore, Samanhudi & Linse (2019) found that Indonesian postgraduate students at a UK University faced problems related to critical thinking realization in their essay writing. Azizah & Budiman (2018) observed that postgraduate encountered difficulties in writing paper for international publication.

Studies on writing skills have been conducted in other countries. A study by Nair & Hui (2018) found that senior students in Kuala Lumpur, especially female students, made significantly less errors than male students in their descriptive writing. Trinh & Truc (2014) mentioned
that genre-based approach significantly improved Vietnamese undergraduate students’ ability in writing argumentative essays. Cho & Brutt-Griffler (2015) observed that a middle school students in Korea desired extra help on their writing to gain balanced English competence. Barrett & Chen (2011) found that Taiwanese College Students overused both the definite and indefinite articles but underused the zero article. Furthermore, Raas (2015) discovered that Palestinian Arab students from Israel succeeded in writing topic and concluding sentences. Ahmed (2010) found that Egyptian university students encounter some problems in the cohesion and coherence of EFL essay writing. Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal (2016) learned that the major problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing are insufficient linguistic proficiency. Terenin (2013) found the reasons which caused Russian Learners of English wrote all types of unclear sentences. Miri & Jolie (2018) found that anxiety has both positive and negative effects for Afghan undergraduate students in their writing.

The contributions of writing skills research have been proved in many studies in different countries. However, it is rare to find empirical evidence of writing skills problems on students in international class in Indonesian context where English as a foreign language. Therefore, it is significant to investigate the process and problems faced by students in writing English, and the factors which inhibit and improve their writing skills. English written ability is essential for tertiary level students at international class, since it is crucial skills to do their daily assignment, and to write their research final project.

Method

Participants

The participants were six female international class of undergraduate students in one of private universities in Central Java. International class in this context is Indonesian students who take international class, in which they study for two years in the university within the country and two years in overseas university. They were in the fourth semester from communication study program which consisted of only six female students in the class. The researcher was their lecturer who taught Kemuhammadiyahan as one of the compulsory subjects for international class. She met them once a week for 100 minutes. The teaching learning activities were held online during COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the study, the researcher gave brief explanation about the objectives of the study, and if they agreed to join this study voluntarily, then they had to fill open ended questionnaire, and joined the interview which was also held online. In addition, their direct responds, which were written in English in online assignment for two meetings, were used as the data to be analyzed. At the beginning of the study, the researcher gave brief explanation about the objectives of the study, and if they agreed to join this study voluntarily, then they had to fill open ended questionnaire, and joined the interview which was also held online. In addition, their direct responds, which were written in English in online assignment for two meetings, were used as the data to be analyzed.

Instruments

In order to obtain the data, there were documentation of students’ two assignments in online lesson, questionnaire, and interview for the purpose of data reliability and validity. The open-ended questionnaire was distributed using Google form after four meetings to reflect their process and problems in doing their assignment, which was written in English. Open-ended questionnaire was created by the researchers by referring to the purpose of this study.
Data Analysis

A week after finishing responding the questionnaire, they conducted online interview through zoom application related to the process, problems, and factors which support and inhibit them in writing English for their assignment. In addition, all respondents were interviewed individually. Both questionnaire and interview used Indonesian to get more detail data. Furthermore, the students’ work was assessed using the rubric which was developed by Jacobs (1981). The rubric assessed the aspect of content, organization, vocabulary, language use and writing mechanism. There were two raters who assessed the students' work for the purpose of data validity. SA is an English teacher and CR is one of final semester of overseas undergraduate students who is studying at university where this study was held. The result from two raters was then divided to acquire average score for each student. For the confidentiality, all respondents were coded as S1 to S6. S1 means student number 1. The results which was obtained from the students' work then cross-checked with the results of questionnaire and interview were analyzed qualitatively to draw conclusion.

Results

The Process of English Writing in Undergraduate International Class

The process of students’ English writing refers to Harmer’s study (2014) that there are four stages in writing process: planning, drafting, editing and final version. Based on the interview and open-ended questionnaire, all students did those four stages. For the planning stage, all students collected and read materials such as journals, e-books, and other sources from internet before writing. Each student had her own preparation in planning stage. For an example, S2 read all references from journals and other references, then she copied and pasted some materials that she needed. She read it several times before she started writing. In addition, S1 stated that in this stage she tried to understand the instruction carefully first in order to be able to do assignment based on the instruction. Then, she searched related materials needed from books and journals from internet. She searched at least from three different resources to get more detailed information. Whereas, S5 checked from the power point given by the lecturer and also searched materials from the internet. S3 collected all materials from e-books and journals from internet then she summarized and described it in detail using her own words in Indonesian before translating in English.

Usually I use Google using keyword to search information that I need. Most resources are in Indonesian, therefore I read, summarize, paraphrase and translate them into English (S4)

At the beginning, I search materials and read books to do the assignment given by the lecturer. I read all materials and I copy some words, I read and understand them then I try to combine with my own ideas (S6).

In the second stage, drafting, students started to write their English writing assignment. All students did not write their assignment directly in English. They summarized and paraphrased the materials in Indonesian first before they translated them into English (S2 and S5). Most of them used Goggle translation application if they encountered any difficulties.

After reading all materials, then I write the main point that I need. I then paraphrased those main points into English. Since the resources are in Indonesian, then I paraphrase them into Indonesian first, after that I translate them into English. I use Google translate application. I am
always confused with my structure, therefore to ensure the proper use of it, I check it by using Google Translation (S1).

I face difficulties in writing English to finish my assignment. I also encounter problem in translating sentences into English because the dominant resources are in Indonesian. Therefore, I rewrite the materials in Indonesian. The problems that I encounter when I have summarized the answer using my own words then I translate the answers using Google translate, the results is messy and it is difficult to understand. The worst part is I translate my answer from Indonesian into English, then from English I translate again into Indonesian. The meaning is totally different with the answer that I want. When I try to translate into English myself, the sentences that I have translated are also hard to understand. If the resources are in English, I do not understand them well, in which therefore I cannot summarize them. Therefore, I am even more confused as to how I can submit my assignment that should be in English if the assignment and the sentences I write is hard to understand. Finally I copy paste the materials that I got from internet then I recompose it be one (S6).

The third stage is editing. In this stage students edited their draft several times. Although, there was one student stated that she only checked her draft once (S2). Others reread their draft two until four times such as S5, S4, S2 and S6. They sometimes reread themselves and then ask their friends to check them.

After finishing translating all paragraphs, then I read twice to three times. During the first reading, I check and if I find mistakes, then I correct it. In the second and third reading, I check the correction that I have made in the first reading (S1).

After I finish my draft, I check and reread it usually twice. If I am not sure with my draft which written in English, I ask my friends to check whether or not my English is correct (S3).

The last stage is final version. The final version is a draft that has been edited and ready to upload and submit to the lecturer. They considered their drafts to be ready to read and finish it, when they already reread and corrected it several times (S4 and S3), and because the deadline to submit was closing, they submitted their assignment whether or not they were sure of it (S1). There was one interesting comment that one student made that she submitted her English assignment although she was not sure with her final version.

I directly revise the mistakes that I have made then I directly submit it to the lecturer because I do not like postponing submitting the assignment (S2).

I submit it to the lecturer, when I finish checking my draft. I am confident with my work. I do not want to compare them with my friends’ work, since I do it online. It is different when I do my assignment in the class room or offline, then I sometimes ask my friends (S5).

I wish I can submit the assignment which can be understood by my lecturer. Although I am not sure with my English assignment because I only compile them from many English resources. I really want to write the assignment in Indonesian but it will not be scored by my lecturer. However, if I force myself to use English, I am afraid of making mistakes and the English sentences that I made cannot be understood by my lecturer (S6).

The Problems Faced by Students in Writing English

In view with the rubric developed by Jacobs (1981) to assess the students’ writing, the assessment covers five aspects: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanic.
Content

The finding revealed that the students had problems in writing the content of the topic that they should write in English. Two students acquired very poor of this aspect (S6 and S3), two students obtained fair to poor (S4 and S5), and two students got good to average (S1 and S2). They encountered difficulties to develop and elaborate the topic deeply. This might be caused by their limited knowledge of the subject. Some respondents wrote one paragraph which consisted of only one sentence in too long sentence and its meaning was not clear and confusing. The writing examples were presented in the following table.

| Student | Criteria | Student’s work | Comments/correction |
|---------|----------|----------------|---------------------|
| S6      | Very poor: Does not show knowledge of subject, non-substantive, not pertinent, or not enough to evaluate | Why muhammadiyah still alive compared with other organization is because muhammadiyah develop in all fields not just focusing on one sector but muhammadiyah focusing on some sectors and muhammadiyah have a complete purpose than the other organizations. So, that why muhammadiyah still alive until now and still developing in each sectors. | A lot of mistakes, the knowledge of subject is shown but not well illustrated. The paragraph consists of long sentences and lost its meaning. The sentences should be shortened to clarify the meaning. |
| S2      | Good to average: Some knowledge of subject, adequate range, limited development of thesis, mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail | one of aspect their didn’t check the source before they share is their education (i mean not the grade but their knowledge about the hoax, because the high grade of education not means they really know about the knowledge, we can see Ibu Susi Pudjiastuti) | The content is not clear because the topic is not explained in detail. One paragraph consists only one sentence. The sentence is too long and it is not clear. |

Organization

Based on the students’ work, it was found that they still had problems from the aspect of organization. One student got very poor for this aspect (S6), two students acquired fair to poor (S3 and S4) and three students obtained good to average (S1, S2 and S5). S6 got very poor criteria, which meant that she did not communicate her ideas in good organization which made the sentences that she wrote confusing and not clear. Based on the data, the ideas that they wrote were disconnected among sentences and among paragraphs. Therefore, their sentences were hard to understand. It was because they wrote long sentences in one paragraph.
Table 2. Organization problems

| Student | Criteria | Student’s work                                                                                              | Comments/correction                                                                 |
|---------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| S6      | Very poor: Does not communicate, no organization, or not enough to evaluate | Muhammadiyah focuses in some sectors, moves in the field of religious because muhammadiyah is present to purify Islam in Indonesia, muhammadiyah wants to eliminate bid’ah, khurafat, tahayul because that makes many people like losing their religion. | Muhammadiyah focuses on sectors that are associated with religion to ensure purity in the Islam religion in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah wants to eliminate the practice of bid’ah, khurafat, and superstition which leads to many people living lives that are not supported by the religion. |
| S2      | Good to average: Somewhat choppy, loosely organized but the main ideas stand out, limited support, logical but incomplete sequencing | Muhammadiyah establishing orphanages and family care, establishing polyclinics, health centers and hospitals, in the economic field, Muhammadiyah established Baituttamwil, cooperatives, limited companies (PT) and in the field of worship, Muhammadiyah established mosques and mushallas, so that in education there are madrasas Ibtidaiyah and universities in almost all cities in Indonesia. | Muhammadiyah established orphanages and family care, polyclinics, health centers and hospitals. In the economic field, Muhammadiyah established Baituttamwil, cooperatives, and limited companies (PT). In the field of worship, it established mosques and mushallas. Lastly, in education field there were madrasas Ibtidaiyah and universities founded in almost all cities in Indonesia. |

Vocabulary

In view with vocabulary aspect, all students still encountered various problems. The findings revealed that three students got fair to poor, which meant that they still had limited English vocabularies and improper choice of words in expressing their ideas into sentences. Three students obtained good to average, which meant that they still made occasional errors of word idiom form, choice, and usage but the reader could still understand the meaning. Their limited vocabularies compelled them in repeating some words in one paragraph.

Table 3. Vocabulary problems

| Student | Criteria | Student’s work                                                                 | Comments/correction                             |
|---------|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| S4      | Fair to poor: Limited range, frequent errors of word idiom form, choice, usage, meaning confused or obscured | even we live must have an ideal, with the ideals we live, with the ambitions we also have ambitions | - Repetition of words, meaningless sentence. - In this life we have to have ambition |
| S3      | Good to average: Adequate range, occasional errors of word idiom form, choice, usage but meaning not obscured | obsolete or damage | “Obsolete” / “outdated” |
|         |          | - muhammadiyah school are still less interested than public school            | - Muhammadiyah school are still less preferable than the public school |
|         |          | -intentionally.                                                              | - internationally                                |
| Student | Criteria | Student’ s work | Comments/correction |
|---------|----------|----------------|---------------------|
| S5      | Fair to poor: Limited range, frequent errors of word idiom form, choice, usage, meaning confused or obscured | - because it’s already different starting from the economy alone is different - there is very little possibility of a teacher now to teach unpaid, even zero - but that does not mean not being able to give examples of honest and sincere in the present such as | - since, the economies alone are different in comparison to the economy KH. Ahmad Dahlan was living - Moreover, there is very little possibility of a teacher to teach nowadays without being paid. - Hence, that does not mean we cannot identify other examples of other people who are similar to KH. Ahmad Dahlan who are honest and sincere in this present time we are living in |

**Language use**

All students still encountered problems in using language properly in their written in English. All of them acquired fair to poor based on the two raters. This meant that they wrote unclear sentences, used wrong tenses and pronouns, and used wrong articles and preposition which made the meaning of the sentences unclear.

Table 4. Language use problems

| Student | Criteria | Student’ s work | Comments/correction |
|---------|----------|----------------|---------------------|
| S4      | Fair to poor: Major problem in simple complex construction, frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order function, articles, pronouns, preposition and or fragment, run-ons, deletions, meaning confused or obscured | - where it is become - but an ambition without a belief - Muhammadiyah movement is not only limited to understanding efforts to purify Islamic teachings - as I understand - had been change - there is a lot of something new | - where it becomes/it has become - but ambition (avoid starting sentence with but) - Muhammadiyah movement is not only limited to understand the efforts to purify Islamic teachings - To my own understanding - had been changed - there are many new things |
Mechanic

Based on data, one student obtained very poor (S6), which meant that she made a lot of errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing. Three participants (S4, S3, S5) got fair to poor and two of them acquired good to average (S1 and S2), in which they made infrequent errors of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The following were the examples of the error in mechanic.

Table 5. Mechanical problems

| Student | Criteria | Student’s work | Comments/correction |
|---------|----------|----------------|---------------------|
| S3      | Fair to poor: | - because life .... | - Because life (capital letter at the beginning of every new sentence) |
|         | Frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, poor handwriting, meaning is confused or obscured | - Muhammadiyah | - Muhammadiyah |
|         |          | - intentionally | - internationally |
Based on two students’ work, they showed that the types of mistakes they made were similar between their works in the first and second meeting. It was interesting that the score of the students’ work from the first and second were also consistent. Their written work was assessed based on rubric developed by Jacobs, which showed excellent qualification/A (86 – 100), Good/B (70 – 85), Fair/C (60 – 69), poor/D (50 – 59) and Failure/E (0 – 49). The findings were presented in the following table:

| Students | Raters’ score at the 1st meeting | Raters’ score at the 2nd meeting | average score at the 1st meeting | average score at the 2nd meeting | Qualification /Grade | Number of students | Number percentage |
|----------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| S1       | 89                              | 81                              | 88                              | 80                              | 85                  | 84                 | Good/ B            | 2                  | 33%                |
| S2       | 72                              | 80                              | 75                              | 81                              | 76                  | 78                 | Good/ B            | 3                  | 50%                |
| S3       | 65                              | 66                              | 67                              | 65                              | 65.5                | 66                 | Fair/ C            | 2                  | 33%                |
| S4       | 73                              | 66                              | 70                              | 63                              | 69                  | 66.5               | Fair/ C            | 3                  | 50%                |
| S5       | 55                              | 71                              | 59                              | 63                              | 63.5                | 63.5               | Fair/ C            | 4                  | 67%                |
| S6       | 61                              | 57                              | 58                              | 56                              | 59                  | 57                 | Poor/ D            | 1                  | 17%                |
| Total    | 6                               | 1                               | 58                              | 55                              | 58                  | 57                 |                   | 6                  | 100%               |

Based on the table above, it showed that students still had difficulties in writing assignment in English. Only 33% of respondents were in good category, while 50% respondents was in fair, and 17% was in poor qualification. S6 who received the lowest score/D, which meant that her written English competence was still in poor qualification. This result was in line with the result from interview. She was the only one who was not sure of her assignment while
submitting the final version of her written English assignment. She also did more complicated effort than her friends in the process of writing English as mentioned in the process of writing above.

**The Factors Inhibiting and Improving the Students’ Writing Skills**

Based on the result of interview, supported by the results from open-ended questionnaire, it was found that one of several aspects inhibiting the students in English writing included not being confident with their writing. Five out of six students believed that the most common factor which influenced their writing was that they did not have strong English vocabulary.

The factor that constrain me in writing is that I do not feel confident in answering questions using English. Why? I am afraid whether my grammar is right or wrong when I write in English. Can my writing be be understood? So, it takes long time to write English text. Another reason is my lack of English vocabulary (S1).

Some of the students admitted that they did not properly master English grammar, and they had lack of practice in English writing. There was an interesting comment that one student made, in which she mentioned that basically she disliked writing.

The factors which inhibit me in writing English text is lack of vocabulary and grammar that I have. It happens because I lack of practice in writing English (S4)

My vocabulary is few, my grammar is chaotic, and I am not used to write English text using formal vocabulary. Basically I myself do not like writing (S2)

Moreover, this study also found that the aspects which encouraged the students to write English included because they were in international class, in which all of the assignments should be written in English. They had strong efforts to improve their vocabularies by watching English movie and reading English books/journals. They also had strong ambition to study and go overseas. They believed that their teachers and friends supported them to improve their competence in English.

One of the factors which encourages me to write English text is because it is an obligation to write in English since I am in the environment where I have to use English. So, either I like or not, I still have to learn writing English text (S1)

My friends and lecturers influence me a lot. When we always use English verbally and in writing during class, I will also automatically try to do it (S6).

The findings of this research showed that 50% respondents acquired fair score, and 17% was in poor qualification for their English writing. This finding was different from a study conducted by Toba, Noor, & Sanu (2019) who found that the English writing ability of undergraduate students can be considered as good. In addition, the results of this study was also not in line with Husin & Nurbayani’s study (2017) who explained that the average score of thesis written in English by university students were relatively good quality. The finding of this study also showed slight difference to a study done by Nair & Hui (2018) who found that female students made significantly less errors than male students in their descriptive writing. Since all respondents of this study were female students, there was no presented comparison.

On the other hand, the finding of this study showed that students encountered difficulties in the matter of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanic. This finding of
this study was consistent with the finding study done by Pablo & Lasaten (2018) in Philippines, Alfaki (2015) in Sudan, and Ibnian (2017) in Jordanian EFL learners. The finding of this study was again in line with the study conducted by Mudawy & Mousa (2015) who found that problems of academic writing among Saudi University Students were spelling mistakes, vocabulary, and structural difficulties. One of the findings in the study, in which the students showed difficulties in using articles, supported a study done by Barrett & Chen (2011) in Taiwan. This current study found that the students also had problem in organization and language use, which supported a research Ahmed (2010) in Egypt and a study by Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal (2016) in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The study found that all participants had done the four steps in the process of writing. They did well for the planning, drafting, editing and final revision. This study learned that they still found difficulties in the content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanic. This study also showed that the strongest factors inhibiting their English writing were related to their mastery of grammar, vocabulary, lack of practice and their self-confidence to write in English. In addition, the factors which encouraged them to write English were the demand as international class students and their ambition to obtain scholarship and study overseas.

The limitation of this current study relates to the number of participants, which only comprised of six female students in international class. Therefore, it will need further research on this topic with larger participants from many different faculties. The findings of this current study may not be generalized in all situations due to students and cultural situation, teachers’ competence and their qualification, and university policy.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by Direktorat Riset dan Pengabdian Masyarakat Republik Indonesia.

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