

Rhetoric and Language Problems in Writing Background of the Study of S1 Students' Theses

Erfan

FKIP, The University of Jember

Abstract: This study was intended to search for the answers to the problems on: 1) rhetorical problems; 2) grammatical and lexical problems and 3) mechanics problems found in thesis background written by EFL students of English Department at Universitas Jember. All analyses indicated fair results. In terms of rhetoric, for instance, unsatisfactory organized and developed through introduction and body were found; irrelevant supporting details occurred; and ununified paragraphs were sometimes seen. The conclusion of the discourse did not lead to the research questions to solve. In terms of grammar and vocabulary also showed fair results. The most outstanding problems occurred on little variety of sentence length, grammar errors, limited variety of lexical items and occasional inappropriate choice of words. In terms of mechanic problems, the results showed very good result. Thus, the result of the analysis in terms of mechanics was excellent to very good.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Language Problems, Writing, Theses

1. Introduction

Writing is the act of thought. It means that writing is one of the most disciplined ways of making meaning and one of the most effective methods we can use to monitor our own thinking. In addition, writing is a process of generating language and communicating meaning. Of the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing, writing is considered a more integrated skill because writing, which means expressing one's idea in acceptable written language, needs the writer's communicative competence. This present study was intended to explore language problems in thesis writing. The main purpose of this study was intended to describe:

1) what rhetorical problems; 2) what grammatical and lexical problems; and 3) what mechanics problems were found in thesis background written by the students at the university

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework on writing in ELT (English language teaching)

Writing, according to Brown (1997:199), is a combination between linguistic competence and communicative competence. The former refers to the learner's knowledge of language rules, and the latter refers to learner's ability to communicate functionally and interactively. Canale and Swain (1980) state that the competence minimally includes four areas of knowledge: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. This suggests that writing any form of composition needs the writer's mastery of both linguistic and communicative competence. However, O' Maggio (1993) argues that writing in a second or foreign language is not simply a matter of how to write new things down in a new code, but it is the ability to use the structures, lexical items, and their conventional representation in an ordinary matter of fact of writing. Thus, a writer should, at least, know and master the rules of the language: the grammar, and know how to communicate functionally and interactively, particularly when it is concerned with the second or foreign language writing.

According to Cumming (1989) and Krapels (1990), over the past several years a consensus has emerged among researchers that second or foreign language proficiency—defined as control over the linguistic elements of a second language—and expertise in writing are different, although not unrelated abilities. That is, second or foreign language writers use many of the same writing process in their second or foreign language as in the first, and expertise in writing can transfer from

the first to the second language, given at least a certain level of language proficiency. However, because of the constraints of limited second or foreign language knowledge, writing in a second or foreign language may be hampered because of the need to focus on language rather than content. Further Silva (1993) states that a review of differences between first and second or foreign language writing revealed that writing in a second or foreign language tends to be more constrained, more difficult, and less effective than writing in a first language; second or foreign language writers plan less, revise for content less, and write less fluently and accurately than first language writers.

2.2. *Conceptual review on written communication*

Although some concern has recently been expressed regarding the need for awareness of how miscommunication can occur in interpersonal cross-cultural encounters (Ferraro, 1994), written communication does not appear to have received much attention, although understanding possible misinterpretations of the written word is equally necessary. One may expect written communication to have a lesser chance of being misinterpreted as it tends to be more organized, and therefore clearer, than oral communication (Sani, 1995).

However, misinterpretations may still occur, especially in cross-cultural situations, for several reasons. As Sani (1995) points out, when a message is produced and accessed at a formal different time and place, the frame of reference of the discourse can only be inferred. Compounded by the lack of non-verbal cues to reinforce interpretation, written texts are left more open to the influence of personal judgments, and thus cultural influence is expected to be in evidence (Sani, 1995). Thus, rhetoric in writing cannot be separated from culture since rhetoric is cultural phenomena. Rhetoric refers to the art of writing, including the practical skill of

delivering a well-constructed theoretical science of formulating rules and conditions for good and balanced exposition (Wahab, 1986). It is a mode of thinking or finding all available means for the achievement or a desired end. Basically, it deals with what goes on in the mind rather than what comes out of the mouth (Kaplan, 1980). Rhetoric can also be defined as the study and uses of written, spoken and visual language. It investigates how language is used to organize and maintain social groups, construct meanings and identities, coordinate behavior, mediate power, produce change, and create knowledge.

Hyland (2003) states that in order to write well in English, good grammar, vocabulary and mechanics should be fulfilled in order to attain good rhetorical pattern. They include effective use of a wide variety of correct sentences; variety of sentence length; effective use of transitions; no significant errors in agreement, tense, number, person, articles, pronouns and prepositions; effective use of a wide variety of lexical items; word form mastery; effective choice of idiom and correct register.

According to Hyland (2003:36), another important dimension of difference in writing is culture. Cultural factors help shape students' background understandings, or schema knowledge, and are likely to have a considerable impact on how they write, their responses to classroom contexts, and their writing performance. Culture is generally understood as a historically transmitted and systemic network of meanings which allow us to understand, develop, and communicate our knowledge and beliefs about the world. This means that language and learning are inextricably bound with culture (Hyland, 2003). Since language and writing are cultural phenomena, the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the L1 interfere with writing in the L2.

Concerning EFL writing in the Indonesian context, Fisher (1988, cited in Mukminatien, 1997) has noticed that Indonesian students are hesitant about writing in English although they are competent in structure. It denotes that writing is not easy to acquire. A piece of writing requires the writer's ability to use not only his linguistic competence, but also his communicative competence. This is, according to Brown (1997), because an ability to convey messages and to negotiate meaning interpersonally within specific context is badly needed by the writers.

2.3. *Review of previous studies on rhetoric*

Sabilah's (1999) research findings concerning linguistic problems in writing showed that when writing an essay, students still had linguistic problems on grammar, vocabulary, mechanic, unity and coherence. Rasyid's (1999) research on the teaching of argumentative writing through cooperative learning showed that general achievement of students' writing skill from the two groups were significantly different. Students of cooperative learning groups significantly performed better than those of non-cooperative learning groups.

Previous studies on rhetoric in Indonesian context were done by several researchers. Wahab (1995) pioneered a preliminary study on the rhetoric of academic writing by Indonesian writers examining argumentative and expository papers. His findings show that the Indonesian rhetoric thought patterns are in the process of change, shifting from circular patterns into linear patterns. Some types of paragraphs show the straight linear approach, some exemplify circular or spiral structure, and some other are neither linear nor circular. Emphasis of change is indicated by the use of linear structure as a result of computer technology that requires a tendency to use direct thought patterns rather than indirect thought patterns.

Based on the preliminary study which was done during the month of April 2016, however, some language problems are found. In terms of grammar, it was found that agreement between subject and the antecedent does not match one another, especially concerning the tenses. This might be because those who failed did not know how to use acceptable English words in writing their theses. It might also be that they had less opportunity to practice writing articles or any other kinds of academic writing. The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill, it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. This is undoubtedly the act of composing that can create problems for writers, especially for those writing in a second language (L2) in academic contexts.

Some other language problems might be found in other thesis backgrounds written by EFL students. Therefore, it is very important to investigate the rhetoric and language problems in writing background of study of S1 theses by EFL students at Universitas Jember.

3. The Study

3.1. Research context

The setting of the research was at FKIP Universitas Jember. Theses written by the last five-year graduates of English at the university were written in English. They were the theses written by S1 students of 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 graduates.

3.2. *Research design*

This study was descriptive quantitative. Any treatment was not used before measuring the thesis written by EFL students. Instead, the thesis written—the background of the study—were used as the main data. What is meant by background of the study is that the first section of the thesis written in the first chapter before the research problems. This study was intended, first of all, to find out what rhetorical, grammatical and lexical problems; and what mechanics problems that were found in thesis background written by EFL students. They were analyzed using rubrics, and the problems found were calculated in the form of tallies..

3.3. *Research participants*

The research participants were students at a university in East Java, Indonesia who have written their theses, and the lecturers as the raters of the thesis documents.

3.4. *Research data and analysis*

The research data were the thesis documents and analysed by using the rubrics to find out the rhetoric and language problems occurring in S1 students' theses. Such study of writing background of the study in English thesis demanded that the researcher acquire particular knowledge of writing in English and techniques of writing the thesis, particularly related to the use of English in the written form. In such a way, he spent a great deal of time reading and understanding the necessary theories and concepts before collecting and analysing the data.

Examples of the research data include as follows;

“English is an International language functioning as a means of communication in the world. English also has a very important role in Indonesia. Therefore, as the important foreign language, English is taught from the elementary school to universities.

There are four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and language components (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) that should be mastered and developed by the students who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Students of senior high school are expected to use language directly and indirectly. It means that the students are able to express ideas or communicate in both speaking and writing. According to Raimes (1983:3), when we learn second or foreign language, we learn to communicate with other people by using the target language. And, communication will happen if we understand the others' utterances, talk to them,

read what they have written, and write to them. Therefore, communication can be done in the spoken and written form. “ ((sample 4).

The paragraphs above also lack of transitions. It seems that there is not a clear link between the first and the second paragraphs. They also show ununified and ineffective use of transitions and reference. The following sample is considered an inadequate way of writing a paragraph, (see sample appendix 3, sample 10):

“Based on the phenomenon above, the National Ministry of Education in Indonesia has decided that English is taught in Indonesian schools as a foreign language and it is considered as a compulsory subject from junior high schools to senior high schools. Even, in some elementary schools, English is offered as an elective subject. The objective of learning English is to make students able to communicate in English both in spoken and written forms.” (taken from sample 10)

It would have been better to divide the first sentence into two. They should be written as,

“Based on the phenomenon above, the National Ministry of Education in Indonesia has decided that English is taught in Indonesian schools as a foreign language. Therefore, it is considered as a compulsory subject from junior high schools to senior high schools.”

4. Research findings and discussion

In terms of rhetorical problems, the samples taken show different results. The first one shows that the result was fair, because some pattern of organization – an introduction, body, and conclusion was poorly done and lack of focus in some paragraphs.

Another problem on rhetoric also occurred on the following two paragraphs, taken from sample 20 (the second and the third paragraphs) as:

“English is the first foreign language studied in Indonesia from elementary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools, up to universities. It implies that learning English means using it to communicate with others to learn and master both oral and written communication.

The goal of teaching English in Indonesia should indicate life skill integration since the skills cannot be separated from the others. Therefore, the English teaching should enable students to have ability in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In this case, teachers should implement the process of teaching English that reflects the four skills in balance. Speaking as one of the four language skills is so much a part of daily life that we take for granted. The average person

produces tens of thousands of words a day, although some people like auctioneers or politicians may produce even more than that (Thornbury, 2005:1). That skill needs to be learned...” (taken from sample 20)

It seems that the two paragraphs above were inadequate to be considered as good paragraphs. This is because the former was too short. It only consisted of two sentences. Besides, a good paragraph usually contains one main idea and some supporting details, but the above sentences were not well-organized. It can be proved that the second sentence of the first paragraph above is very difficult to understand.

The second reason is that the former and the latter paragraphs were not well connected. The writer seemed to jump over directly to the next paragraph without considering whether or not the message could be followed with ease. In addition, the relationships among sentences were not clear. No effective use of transitions and reference were found. The grammar and vocabulary also showed fair results. The most outstanding problems occurred on the little variety of sentence length, grammar errors, limited variety of lexical items and occasional inappropriate choice of words. The grammatical problems occurred in some paragraphs, for instance (sample 70):

“Language as a means of communication plays () very important role in social relationship among human beings. As () international language, English is a medium of communication which can help people to interact, converse, and share their ideas or feelings to other people. English is an international language that is why it is possible for everyone to communicate with other people around the world if someone has an ability to use English. In Indonesia, the ability in using English is very important. English is one of the compulsory subjects taught in junior high schools, senior high schools and university as the first foreign language. In addition, it is taught in elementary school and some kindergartens. That’s why Indonesian Government has already ran the policy and regulation for Elementary school to give the English subject for the students in the classroom. It is one of the concerns of the Indonesian government to encounter the era of information and technology” (taken from sample 70).

In the above paragraph, the writer should insert an article “a” in the first sentence, and an article “an” in the second sentence. The two articles should have been inserted to indicate one entity or a countable noun which is not clear yet to the

reader. The article “a” is used before a consonant sound, whereas the article “an” is used before a vowel sound. In addition to errors on articles, it was also found an error on the use of tense. The underlined word “ran” in the paragraph above should be written as “run” to indicate past participle. The idea for this is that, the verbs after the word “has”, “have” or “had”, should be followed by past participle or the third verb (V3). Another problem was the improper use of the –ing form that can be proved from the following sentence (sample 4):

It means that students have already known how to speak without given any theories because of their environment, but in writing they need several processes and learn certain theories.

The sentence should be written as:

It means that students have already known how to speak without being given any theories because of their environment, but in writing they need several processes and learn certain theories.

Or,

It means that students have already known how to speak without giving them any theories because of their environment, but in writing they need several processes and learn certain theories.

As a rule, all verbs should be in the forms of gerund after prepositions. If the writer prefers using passive form, the former can be taken as the alternative. On the other hand, the latter is better since native speakers of English prefer using active form to passive form. In terms of mechanics problems, the improper use of comma is sometimes found, as quoted in the following sentences:

“Writing is not as easy as speaking. Harmer (2004:3) states that spoken language, for a child, is acquired naturally as a result of being exposed to it, whereas the ability to write has to be consciously learned. It means that students have already known how to speak without given any theories because of their environment, but in writing they need several processes and learn certain theories. Many students, especially Indonesian students who learn English as a foreign language, are able to communicate orally but they cannot express their ideas in written form”.

The first two sentences should be written as:

Writing is not as easy as speaking. Harmer (2004:3) states that spoken language for a child is acquired naturally as a result of being exposed to it. On the other hand, the ability to write has to be consciously learned.

No comma is needed in the first sentence. To show a contrast between two statements, it is advisable to use a transitional signal “on the contrary”, because the two statements are really in vice versa. In addition to the above problems, the improper use of capitalization is also found, such as,

That’s why Indonesian Government has already ran the policy and regulation for Elementary school to give the English subject for the students in the classroom. It is one of the concerns of the Indonesian government to encounter the era of information and technology.

Both words, “government and elementary”, need no capitalization in their initials, because both of them are not proper names. Thus, they should be written as,

That’s why Indonesian government has already ran the policy and regulation for elementary school to give the English subject for the students in the classroom. It is one of the concerns of the Indonesian government to encounter the era of information and technology.

The above findings are based on the analysis by using rubrics as presented in the appendix. It was found that of 88 (eighty eight) samples taken, only 10 (ten) of them show satisfactory results. It means that 78 (seventy eight) of them show unsatisfactory.

By using percentage calculation, it was found that only 11.36 % show satisfactory results, and the rest 88.63% show unsatisfactory results. It denotes that the results of the study are very important to pay attention to. It means that the results of the study show very serious problems to overcome. This is in line with O’Maggio’s (1993) idea, stating that this might be because those who failed did not know how to use acceptable English in writing the thesis. It might also be that they had less opportunity to practice writing articles or any other kinds of academic writing. As we know that the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill, it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through

experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Perhaps it is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of writing down on the one end, to the more complex act of composing on the other end.

Although the students were guided by his advisor(s) to write theses, errors in terms of rhetoric, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics were still found as presented previously. Based on the findings, it was known that the results showed unsatisfactory. Only 10 out of 88 samples showed satisfactory results. On the other hand, 78 samples showed unsatisfactory. Such errors occurred because both the student and the advisor were non-native speakers of English. In the academic context, this cannot be accepted as the acceptable reason that non native speakers of English may make errors. It was not a factor of accidental errors, but it was conceptual and serious errors. Thus, the findings were very important to be used as the basis and the guideline to find more reasons why this could have happened.

The results shown in most of the samples are not satisfactory. Almost all analyses indicated fair results. In terms of rhetoric, for instance, unsatisfactorily organized and developed introduction and body were found; irrelevant supporting details occurred; and ununified paragraphs were sometimes seen. Additionally, the conclusion of the discourse did not lead to the research questions to solve. In terms of grammar and vocabulary also showed fair results. The most outstanding problems occurred on little variety of sentence length, grammar errors, limited variety of lexical items and occasional inappropriate choice of words.

In terms of mechanic problems, the results showed very good results. Few noticeable lapses in punctuation or spelling, such as: the use of capitalization, comma, colons and semi colons were found. Finally, the mechanics problems were not noticeable in the samples taken. No noticeable lapses in punctuation or spelling, such as: the wrong use of capitalization, comma, colons and semi colons were found. Thus, the result of the analysis in terms of mechanics was excellent to very good.

5. Conclusion

The research results showed that the students' mastery on how to write in English was so badly needed that the lecturers of writing should focus their attention not only on grammar and mechanics, but also on the structural rhetoric of writing. This may help their students write in English appropriately.

Furthermore, lecturers should choose the materials that are appropriate with the students' level. They should also be up to date, interesting, challenging and authentic for the students. Their appropriate method may enhance their students' skills in coping with writing problems in general, and specifically with writing the theses. This should also solve the students' rhetorical and linguistic problems to improve their knowledge concerning cultural and grammatical aspects that might be useful in academic writing. Finally, other researchers should do further research on the same topic with larger population, more and different variables to map out the problems existing in writing the theses.

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