

The Possible Factors that Influence The Student's English Writing in A Distance Education Context

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1. Introduction

Most English teachers believe that teaching grammar is important because it effects students on their writing. However, most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners find some difficulties in learning grammar. Richards and Renandya (2002) stated that the difficulties on grammar are not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating them into a readable text. They also stated that the writing skill is very complex for it involves planning and organizing. Therefore, the writing skill need to be given more attention in second language acquisition (SLA).

Many researches in EFL have been conducted in the past few decades. However, the research in a distance education concerning student writing is still limited. Student writing in distance education is also considered in determining student failure or success on their study. According to Hughes (1989) that the most appropriate way to examine a student writing skills was by conducting a writing assessment. The writing assessment enables teachers whether a student is able to apply his or her thought using the appropriate grammar and vocabulary.

In a distance education context, teaching grammar is different from those in a face-to-face tutorials or traditional classrooms. Students in distance education mostly learn grammar explicitly. They learn grammar from the instructional materials given without the presence of tutors. Therefore, the design of the

instructional materials in distance education are different from other text books. The materials given have to be easy to understand and provide answer keys. These materials can be also considered as their “tutors”. When students learn or have discussions with their peers, they learn grammar implicitly.

Hurd (2000) stated that distance learners are fairly autonomous at least in their attitude to learning. In other words, students’ self-motivation is one particular important aspect which is a challenge in distance education. In Indonesia, distance education is a particular necessity due to its flexibility and capability of facilitating learners who are unable to attend classroom activities, whilst still providing quality education for a large number of students (Zuhairi et al., 2008).

Most Indonesian students seem weak at English grammar. This happens because grammar is taught by memorizing its rules and patterns. This teaching method effects them to have good sentence and composition. Therefore, the writer is challenged to reveal some possible factors faced by students especially in applying the *simple past tense* and in learning grammar in a distance education context.¹

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing Definition

Byrne (1998: 1) defines writing as “to produce sentences which are arranged in a particular sequence linked together.” According to Lillis (2001) writing is one of the transferable skills that students are required to learn and is

¹ This paper is the dissemination of the part of the writer’s dissertation entitle “Analysing Students’ Grammar Mistakes In Applying *The Simple Past Tense* In A Dstance Education Context”. This paper focuses on the possible factors that influence the student’s writing by analysing the mistakes in their composition.

relevant to the world of work. Dealing with the purpose of writing, Hedge (2000: 86) stated that writing is “to encourage them (students) to reflect on their needs and problems in writing and the nature of the course they are about to follow.” It can be concluded from what Hedge (2000) stated that learners have to engage themselves in thinking and improving their writing skills and raising their awareness of why they are doing and what they are expecting for the course.

2.2. Problems of writing

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) stated that the ability to write well is not naturally acquired for it requires a lot of practises and experience. However, learner’s ability to construct words and produce a good meaning have not always been successful. Myles (2002) stated that writing as composing needs ability and functions as a narrative or descriptive to tell information and becomes argumentative to transform information into new texts. Writing is a complex skill that requires cognitive, creative, and linguistic abilities (Marhaeni, 2008). He also added that writing is a tool, as a cognitive process, which is used to present ideas and cognitively, the potential meaning is contained as a schema in the mind.

2.3. Problems with grammar

Writing is underpinned of the some aspects of grammar. DeKeyser (2005: 3) divided three factors why grammar is difficult to learn; complexity of form, complexity of meaning, and the complexity of the form-meaning relationship. He explains that the complexity of form occurs when learners have problems to express and put words such as morphemes and allomorphs in the right place where the problem of meaning complexity occurs because of either novelty or abstractness, or both. He added that morphemes and allomorphs are parts of morphology that is hard to learn in the second language (L2) learning even after many years in L2 exposure.

2.4. L1 transfer

Another difficulty in learning English tenses could be affected by a learner's first language (L1) transfer in general. Transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (Odin 1989: 27). Lado (1957) (cited in Ellis (2008b: 359) claimed that it will be easy for an L1 learner to have the elements as an L2 while, on the other hand, it will be difficult when the both elements are different. Lado formulated Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) implies that L1 has a great influence in L2 learning.

3. Methodology

For this study, the writer used quantitative and qualitative approaches; analyzing data and interviews. Before doing the interview, the writer firstly analyzed students' examination papers as a primary data. Based on the on result of primary data, the writer then divided the primary data into two groups; students with high mark and students with low mark.

3.1. The primary data

The students' examination papers were the examintaion of *Writing II* period 2011, semester 1. In this semester, there were 265 students joined the examination. The writer only selected students who were registred in Jakarta Central Regional Office (RO). This region covers 51% students' examination papers from several cities such as Bogor, Tangerang, Bekasi, Karawang, Batam, and Bandung. There were 135 students' examination papers and the writer took 30% samples of the whole population which meant 41 sets of student's examination papers.

The grammatical accuracy of the primary data was measured based on the rules of the *simple past tense*, which contains a subject, past verb (verb type two), and adverb (of time). The data were then identified and classified into the categories of problems of verb, no subject, and incorrect adverb of time. The problems of verb into were divided six categories. They were: The use of an incorrect verb, the use of double verbs, the use of present verb, the use of past participle verb, the use of infinitive verb, and no verb. In this study, the analysis was only focused on sentences using *the simple past tense* and ignored the other types of tenses.

3.2. The interviews

The interviews were divided into two groups and conducted in the UT's ROs in two cities, Jakarta and Bogor, which were selected for being easy to reach. All the participants were working students in Jakarta and Bogor. No factors such as age limitation, gender, or job position were determined in the participants.

The writer invited 20 participants who were contacted by phone and email. In the implementation, not all participants could provide their time since they were busy and not ready for the interview. There were only seven participants who were interviewed. Three participants with a high mark and four with a low mark. The writer realized that this is the limitation for the study.

Each participant had 30 minutes for the interview and they had the same set of questions dealing with their beliefs, experiences and problems about learning grammar, particularly the *simple past tense*. Student's essay was also presented to point out their mistakes in applying *the simple past tense* in their writing. They were also asked to correct the mistakes they made. The interview was conducted in Indonesian to avoid misunderstanding and gaining incomplete information.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. The primary data

The writer analysed 978 sentences of 41 students' examination papers and found 420 sentences or 43% grammar mistakes in the students' writing. Based on the main categories, the mistakes dealt with problems of verb (413 sentences or 42.2%), no subject (6 sentences or 0.6%), and incorrect adverb of time (1 sentence or 0.1%). The mistakes dealt with problems of verbs contains of the use of incorrect verbs (31.6%), the use of double verbs (4,5%), the use of present verbs (1,6%), the use of past participle (0,5%), the use of infinitive (0,4%), and no verbs (3,6%).

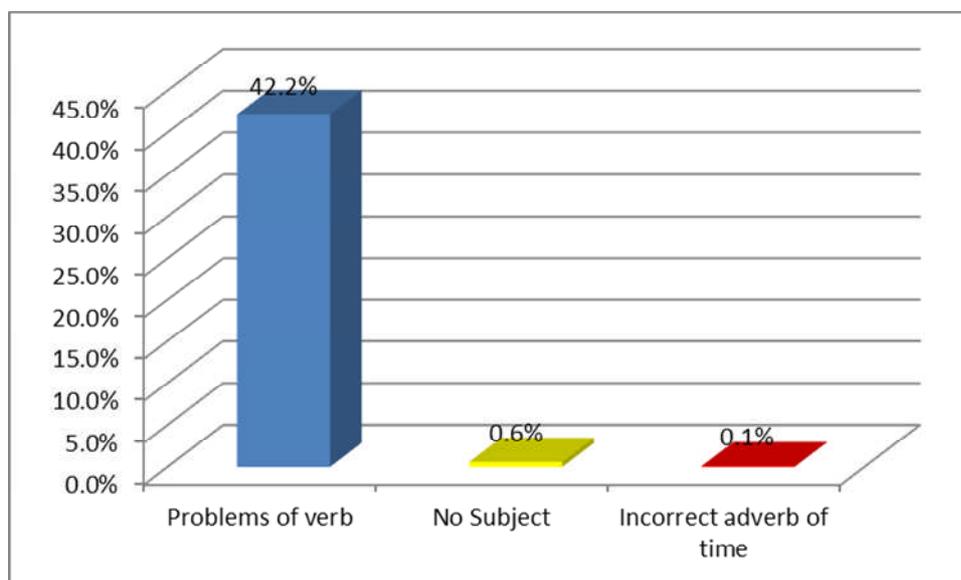


Figure 1: Students' mistakes in applying the *simple past tense* in the course of *Writing II* (BING4105)

Since Indonesian sentence patterns do not have regular and irregular verbs, making a *simple past tense* sentence in English is considered difficult for Indonesian students. Brown (1998) stated that learning irregular verbs in English

is complicated and difficult for language learners, even for those in university. Klein et al. (1995) also suggested that regular verb endings such as *-ed* are hard for many learners to process. Therefore, the writer considers that applying regular and irregular verbs is the main problem faced by the students.

The writer also noticed that L1 transfer can be one of the factors that affect students' mistakes in writing. In this study, the students had negative L1 transfer where the student's L1 influence their L2 learning. This could happen because there is no tense that refers to a particular situation in Indonesian. The uses of a verb in the present, past, or future time In Indonesian does not change.

4.2. The interviews

The writer interviewed two groups; the low mark group and the high mark group. From the low mark group, the writer found two factors; no group discussion, and the students did not join the course's online tutorial. These factors are considered as the main possible problems for the low mark students while the high mark group only did not join the course's online tutorials. The interviews also dealt with how both group learned grammar. These interviews were meant to find out whether they did the same way or techniques in learning grammar.

4.2.1. No group discussion

No group discussion is one of the reasons why the students were not able to apply the *simple past tense*. They did not join the group discussion for several reasons.

'I once had a group discussion but never met them anymore for they were busy working and had a different schedule to each other. So, I decided to study alone.' (017237XXX)

'I had a group discussion but never join it. The meeting was weekly in KOMABITA (UT's English Lovers Club) in Central Jakarta. I could not come to attend the meeting every week.' (015442XXX)

'I did not have a group discussion to learn grammar for it was very difficult to find friends for making a group discussion. So, I did self-studying.' (016432XXX)

Busy working, did not have time, and being difficult to find friends had forbidden the students to have a group discussion. This could be one of the factors that students understanding and comprehension in learning grammar are not maximum. As a result, they had to study alone as an independent learner to motivate themselves in the learning process. Independent learning in many ways is determined by the ability to learn effectively. Learning ability depends on the speed of reading and understanding the content of reading ability.

Because of no group discussion, the students of this group was also lack of input and interaction. Many linguists believe that input provides language information to do the interaction among learners. This group was lack of conversational input where communication accours with other people and promotes learner language acquisition. This supports to what Gass' (2003) belief that input provides positive evidence that enables L2 learners with language acquisition. Based on what Moore (1993) has categorized, this group did learner-content interaction only which made the students did not engage with the other students.

Comparing with high mark group, most of the students in this group had a group discussion when they had problems in grammar. They used their group discussion as one of the tools to help them improve their understanding about grammar.

'Sometimes, I had group discussion to discuss one particular problem such as the simple present. We discussed about it in details and every member of the groups gave their ideas.' (014668XXX)

'I mostly learned grammar myself. I had a study group but the place to meet was far away from my place. We learned in our friend's big house and had time.' (017635XXX)

The group discussion seems to be the key to success for this group to achieve a better score in their examination. They tried to spend their time discussing the problems they had with their group. This is a good strategy for distance learning for they had interaction each other. Mackey (1999) stated that interaction among learners enables them to provoke non target forms such as vocabulary, morphology, and syntax in SLA. Hopefully, learners can practise speaking and how to convey their understanding to share in the discussion with their peers.

4.2.2. Did not join the course's online tutorials

None of the students in low mark group joined the course's online tutorial. This was caused for several reasons; a) They did not have time since they were tired working, b) they had difficulties accessing the online tutorials, which made them lazy, c) they missed the online tutorial information, and d) they were not aware of the online tutorial information.

'No. I didn't have time to open online tutorials for I am tired working. I could access the Internet only in "warnet" (the Internet kios).' (017237XXX)

'I had difficulties to access the online tutorial because it was the first time for me. I didn't join the online tutorials in the first semester. I was surprised to see the online tutorial so I was lazy. I decided to study myself without the online tutorial.' (016925XXX)

'I missed the information about it. Sometime the information was late. I got the password and username but when I logged in there was nothing (blank). I think I also didn't have enough time to join the online tutorial.' (016432XXX)

'It was in the beginning of the semester and I was still not aware about that.' (017237XXX)

Online tutorials are actually provided to support the printed learning materials. The online tutorials are meant to encourage the students to be active and also improve their understanding of the printed materials. The online tutorials are also meant to facilitate communication through technology, which in distance education is expected to enable students to receive feedback from tutors when they have difficulties in learning.

It can be argued that besides being busy and tired from working, the students were also not familiar with the technology of distance learning. Technology as one of the support tools in distance learning is important to help students improve their knowledge. Therefore, students' ability in operating computers, especially the Internet, is strongly required.

As with the low mark group, none of the students in the high mark group joined the course's online tutorials. This occurred because of being disinterested, afraid of slow feedback from the tutor, being computer illiterate, and having no internet connection at their home.

'The problem was when I had learnt the module I actually was not interested in online tutorials. If I had joined the online tutorials, I was sure one tutor would have dealt with many students and would have separated. I was afraid I couldn't ask the tutor specifically and also had slow feedback from him or her. Actually, what I need is sharing to discuss. So far, I can share with my UT and non-UT's friends. But I am planning to join the online tutorials next semester.' (016933XXX)

'First, like I told you I didn't have the Internet access at home so I had to go to 'warnet'. Sometimes, I just had time at late night when my child had already gone to bed. I myself was computer illiterate for I needed my child to help me with the computer.' (017929XXX)

Online tutorials are actually one of the best ways for this group to discuss their learning problems with their friends. Students could have discussed their problems not only with their friends but also with the tutor. Unfortunately, some of them had been worried before they tried to join the tutorials.

It is considered that both groups had low motivation for the course's online tutorial. Spratt et al. (2002) stated that low motivation discouraged the pursuing of autonomous activities. Motivation and autonomy are linked in that autonomy can be encouraged to develop students' motivation to learn. In this case, the teacher's role in giving advice to the students can help them develop their motivation. This motivation can then lead the students to improve their efforts in learning.

Online tutorials also involve either tutor-learner interaction, or learner-learner interaction. As Peters (2001) stated, teacher-student interaction is significant in helping students find solutions to their problems with learning activities. The interaction is also expected to motivate students continuously, guide them in studying, and stimulate them to communicate with the tutors. Also, interaction with tutors in distance learning affects student success and learning. Ali & Ahmad (2011) stated that tutor-student interaction is one the strongest variable in predicting student satisfaction. They also stated that in distance learning, tutor's support, easy communication, and timely help, are important factors for student satisfaction. In learner-learner interaction, it is expected to give benefits to learners in sharing interest in the learning materials. The discussion in learner-learner interaction allows learners to clarify and understand group

interaction, identify group problems, and deepen learner's knowledge for specific content.

4.2.3. Students' technique in learning grammar

4.2.3.1. The Low Mark Group

Most students in this group stated that they learnt grammar through their module, the Internet, and other grammar books when they were asked how they learnt grammar. One student watched TV and listened to radio programmes.

'I think, basically, studying English can be from other English books such as English grammar by Cambridge University and also from the Internet.' (016644XXX)

In learning grammar, students in this group spent one to two hours a week. Their reason was because they were busy working and felt tired when arriving home. They just used their time to learn grammar when they had time.

This group also had some problems in applying the *simple past tense*. Most students of this group had their own problem. while one stated that she had no problems. Their problems were a) being not sure of the sentence they made, b) forgetting and not knowing what tense they had to use, and c) not understanding the tense well enough.

'I think I couldn't differentiate to tell something using simple present or past tense. I was confused. I didn't know whether something I was telling used simple past or simple present.' (017161XXX)

4.2.3.2. The High Mark Group

All of the students in this group learnt grammar from their module, through group discussion, and other grammar books. It is surprisingly that non of

the students learnt grammar through the Internet. This group not only discussed grammar with other students at the same university but also with other people. This is considered the group's success in understanding or solving their grammar problems.

'It's non-UT's group discussion. I discussed grammar with my friends in my work place. They joint UT after I asked them to join UT.' (017237XXX)

In learning the module, the students of this group spent as much time studying grammar as those in the low mark group. In general, they spent about one to two hours a week learning their module. This occurred because they were also busy working.

In learning the grammar module, this group used their leisure time at their work place. They seemed to know that their leisure time was not enough and they used it whenever they had it. This is a good way for distance learning students to use their leisure time to learn the material.

'I was not quite sure how many hours I spent. Whenever I had time, for example before going to bed, I learned the module. That was what I did.' (017929XXX)

'I didn't have particular time to study. I opened the books when I had spare time during the working hours.' (014668XXX)

Some students of this group, surprisingly, also had problems in applying the *simple past tense*. Their problems are a) being careless, and b) sometimes being confusing the *simple past tense* and the *present perfect tense*. The writer considers that these are not really problems for this group for they were able to apply the *simple past tense* and they also got good marks.

'Frankly, I was sometimes confused the use of past tense and perfect tense. I had a problem when I read English

novel comparing English text book. It is easier to understand. In the novel many tenses appeared and sometimes I wondered when I had to use the tenses.'
(016933XXX)

In this category, the writer found that the two groups almost had the same techniques in learning grammar. They also had problems in applying the *simple past tense*. The differences are when the high mark group had group discussion and learnt the module when they had time. This seems really help them understand the tenses they learned.

5. Conclusion

It can be argued that students's writing in applying the *simple past tense* in their examination of *Writing II* were influenced by negative L1 transfer. This occurs because their L1, Indonesian language, does not have a particular tense that refers to a particular situation. Using the incorrect verb, double verbs, and no verbs in their writing are the evidence of negative L1 transfer.

Having no interaction, for having no group discussion, the students of low mark group did not have an engagement with the other students. This happened because they were busy working. They struggled learning the material themselves to comprehend and solve their grammatical problems. As a result, their grammar understanding is weak and they could not achieve what they expected as well.

Both groups also did not join the course's online tutorials. They writer notices that they were not motivated. Even though the course's online tutorials did not affect the high mark group, the provided facilitation promotes learners to learn and interact with other learners and tutors. The online tutorials are also provided

to facilitate communication through technology, which in distance education is expected to enable students to receive feedback from tutors when they have difficulties in learning.

Students in distance education must be aware of their learning environment. They must motivate themselves, if they want to succeed, to use all the learning sources around them. The provided learning sources are meant to help them improve their understanding and learning.

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