



RESEARCH TRENDS IN EFL WRITING IN INDONESIA: WHERE ART THOU?

Fatimah

The University of Sydney, Australia
Brawijaya University of Malang

Harits Masduqi

The University of Sydney, Australia
State University of Malang

Academic writing has been a principal issue in Indonesian universities since students are required to write in English effectively. University students and graduates were found to have low writing ability and do not have sufficient English writing skills. Studies in EFL writing in Indonesian universities mostly focus on the effectiveness of certain approaches by looking at the result of students' written tests. This paper discusses current issues and research trends in EFL writing in Indonesia and offer recommendation for further research which should address students and other stakeholders which significantly influence the teaching of EFL writing in Indonesia.

Keywords: EFL writing, English as a foreign language, English language teaching, Literacy.

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing has been a key issue in universities in Indonesia since students' work is mainly assessed in written form (Coffin, 2003; Curry and Hewings 2003; Tang, 2012). Learning academic writing in English is, however, not easy for non-native speakers of English. Indonesian university students and graduates are reported to have low writing ability (Kridalaksana, 2002). As a foreign language in Indonesia, English is not used daily which means that students do not have sufficient exposure to English. Students do not see an immediate need to learn and use English in daily life, a situation compounded by the fact that writing receives less attention in the syllabus than other skills (Sukandi, 2013).

The focus on the teaching of EFL writing in Indonesia has come about because of specific social and political factors: English remains a foreign language in Indonesia with widely differing levels of access – something which is claimed to entrench existing inequalities (Dardjowidjojo, 1996; Lamb and Coleman, 2008). Some people have tried to introduce English as a second language in 1950s failed for two reasons: First, the second language for Indonesian people is in fact *Bahasa Indonesia* which functions as the national language. Indonesian people usually speak a local language before they learn Indonesian at schools. Second, the majority of Indonesian leaders and grassroots were politically unwilling to support

English as an official language since it was contrary to the spirit of nationalism at that time (Dardjowidjojo, 1996; Masduqi, 2014).

The status of English language impacts significantly on all education levels. Even though English is a compulsory subject for students from Year 3 to the first year in tertiary level, the time allocation for English is insufficient to gain basic communicative competence (Jazadi, 2008; Sadtono, 2001; Sukono, 2002). As a result, English competence of Indonesian students is still low. A survey involving 16 secondary schools in three major Indonesian provinces reveals that no more than 15% of the students have high level of proficiency in the three macro-skills (Sadtono et al., 1996) and most tertiary students have a vocabulary of less than 5, 000 words (Nurweni and Read, 1999). They cannot cope with the tertiary level scientific literacy due to lack English competence and preparation at secondary school level (Sadtono, 2001; Suharmanto, 2009).

The issue of English language teaching becomes more complicated when the students with low English competence and literacy experience enrol in English departments at Indonesian universities. Upon their coming to the first English class, they face the fact that they must be able to use English actively. For Indonesian students whose perceptions of reading and writing are based on cultural values from their home languages, the demands of English literacy in university level are not easy to realise. Moreover, certain supportive conditions, such as a great deal of exposure to English printed texts in real-life situations and verbal communication in English, are mostly invisible in Indonesia. The evidence is also that the teaching of English at tertiary level in Indonesia is traditional and ineffective and that there is a gap between government policy/ curriculum and classroom implementation (Cahyono and Widiati, 2006; Marcellino, 2008; Masduqi, 2014; Sadtono, 2001).

Recent reforms have moved to more communicative and competency-based curriculum models at secondary and tertiary levels because of the perceived failure of traditional approaches (Jazadi, 2008; Marcellino, 2008; Musthafa, 2001). The changes in tertiary institutions with learner centred instruction and facilities such as free Internet access, multimedia classrooms, and self-access centre have been more feasible at English departments in state and private universities in Indonesia. English departments in Indonesian universities, therefore, focus on improving students' English competence in order to cope with the complexity of information in academic texts written in English, thus providing both the basis for further study and research and also giving the basis for language development in other macro-skills (Renandya, 2004).

Before discussing the development of research on writing in Indonesian higher education in details, it is imperative to discuss issues in the teaching of English as a foreign language in general. The next section which discusses general issues in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language is important as English language teaching in Indonesia has been influenced by the development of approaches and techniques of English language teaching in the world for decades.

Issues in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

The teaching of English as a foreign language has attracted linguists and educators since the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was proposed as the first method of language teaching. Based on GTM, reading materials of a foreign language were the key component in language teaching. Therefore, memorising impractical grammar rules and vocabulary and translating words of a particular text in the target language with meanings in the learners' first language were prioritised in daily teaching (Dubin and Bycina, 1991; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, monotonous translation and grammar drills were used to work out and reinforce the knowledge without much consideration to content, whereas how learners undergo the process of understanding longer texts and do communicative activities for oral production was not a main concern (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This approach saw the teaching of reading as part of the learning of grammar – other skills such as writing, speaking, and listening were seen to follow this. This approach suited contexts where examinations were important and where teachers' skills in the target language were not always of a high level.

The Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) was introduced as the new language teaching method giving more attention on spoken form and pronunciation. This was a move that essentially represented the disappointment of language educators with GTM who treated speaking skill as a secondary matter. In this method, the teaching of reading and writing was given a substantial attention only after the learners have improved their speaking skills. In doing so, language teachers applying ALM spent sufficient time to cater oral production first before teaching reading and writing to their pupils (Rivers, 1970). It should be noted that ALM teaching technique is still influential nowadays with the establishment of language laboratory at schools in developing countries. The audiolingual method drew on behaviourist psychology and developed after World War II with the need for oral competence of language learners. Criticisms of ALM are that it does not optimally support students to arrive at reading comprehension of particular texts and to write in English effectively.

Some methods appeared with a similar claim that the new emerging method is better or more effective in producing good language users than the previous ones. The methods include the Situational Language Teaching (in 1950s and 1960s), Silent Way, Natural Approach, and Total Physical Response (in 1970s and 1980s). Nevertheless, it should be noted that most of the language methods emphasised more on the need of speaking proficiency than reading and writing. The teaching of reading and writing was usually given a substantial attention after the learners have improved their speaking skills (Nunan, 1991; Nuttall, 2005; Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

In 1970s and 1980s Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged as a popular method all over the world. The thinking behind these approaches to second language learning was that if young children can learn their first language naturally through interaction with parents and others, why can't second language learners learn the same way – more naturally. Since most bilingual people in the world learnt their second language naturally through communication, then we must look at how they did this and replicate it in the classroom. The changes came from research in the US into communicative competence and first language and literacy development (Canale, 1983; Chomsky, 1965; Hymes, 1972; Krashen, 1985); from work by the Council of Europe in the development of functional/ notional approaches to language teaching (Van Ek, 1976) and from the changes in the UK where learning to learning through talk became central to the education system (Barnes et al., 1969).

This led to a revolution in the way language was taught and learned. Classroom interaction was now the key to learning. Students would be given input and then would have the chance to practise the language in pairs and small groups. A communicative language teaching lesson might involve the following. The teacher greets the class, asking students how they are in the target language. The teacher then introduces some pictures and students give the teacher words and phrases describing what they see. The students then in groups arrange the pictures in sequence to make a story. They try to tell this story in the target language to the teacher. The teacher then reads the students a book with the story in which the pictures occur. This is followed by games and pair work in which students practise the language. Finally, they get the chance to write their own stories (Nunan, 1991; Nuttall, 2005; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). As a consequence, the teaching of reading and writing is less prioritised and focuses more on vocabulary enrichment which is essential to improve students' communicative competence.

Since the end of twentieth century, the majority of language educators have no longer judged the teaching methods as the important aspect to justify the success or failure of language teaching. They have argued against any particular method because of the lack of research evidence supporting any one method and also because of the vast gap between the 'theory' of the methods and the ways they are implemented in 'practice'. This is called the post-method era (Nunan, 1991; Richards and Rodgers, 2001) realising that no single teaching method can work best for all pedagogical contexts (Kumaravivelu, 2006)

Considering the significance of EFL writing and the status of English language teaching in Indonesia, researchers have established a body of research into the development of English writing. The next section discusses current research trends in EFL writing in Indonesian universities. Researchers embarking on EFL writing research in Indonesia have tried to provide a better understanding of the nature of literacy in Indonesia, but rarely discusses stakeholders' perspectives on what constitutes EFL writing program and contributing factors which potentially affect it.

Research Trends in EFL Writing in Indonesia

There is a strong tradition of research in the area of writing and the teaching of writing, in the Indonesian EFL context. The research aims have been varied: to identify problems faced by students in both L1 and L2 contexts, to explore factors contributing to the success and failure of writing, and to evaluate writing programs developing student writing skills. The research in the area of EFL writing can be categorised into three major themes: research focusing on writing process, research focusing on writing products, and research based on genre-based approach.

The studies focusing on the writing process can be categorised into two main streams: studies based on the model of writing as process and those referring to writing pedagogy (Widiati and Cahyono, 2006). Studies based on the model of writing as process include studies that tend to examine the effectiveness of the process approach and, more particularly, various intervention strategies such as conferencing, peer feedback provision, and collaborative work. The following section reviews the main studies. Antoni and Gunawan (2004) suggested this process approach was effective in empowering students to revise their writing through multiple drafts before they eventually produce their final product. Suh (2003) investigated the effects of the process-based writing activity in the Korean EFL context by using CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning). She attempted to ascertain the effect of CALL on both EFL learners' attitudes toward writing in English and their writing proficiency. The findings indicate that this strategy promotes students' writing skills in the areas of fluency, organization, and mechanics. However, the students were reported as not fully succeeding in improving their writing ability in the certain aspects of English writing.

Another study investigating the implementation of this approach, Widiati and Widayati (1997) revealed that conferencing was reported to create an atmosphere where students were encouraged to speak in English. In regard to peer editing as one of common activities in process approach, Munandar (2004) found that students of a higher level could be invited to beginners' class to help in peer editing. Laksmi (2003) explored the effectiveness of scaffolding in helping students improve their writing skills. She found that scaffolding was effective in encouraging students to write more confidently since they did rewrite-revise process two or three times before they submitting their writing.

Aridah (2004) identified which types of feedback students preferred. Findings were that all students liked to have feedback and found it very useful in building writing skills. She also showed that students mostly like to have feedback in the following rank: grammar, content, organization, vocabulary and mechanics. Studies on peer feedback and teacher's feedback have also been conducted in other Asian countries such as Turkey (Kurt and Atay, 2007; Yangin Eksi, 2012), Malaysia (Hajimohammadi and Bagherkazemi, 2011), Hong Kong (Roskams, 1999). Research into collaborative work is also common in process approach. Several studies in this area were conducted in different countries such as in Malaysia (Fung, 2010; Suwantarathip and Wichadee, 2014), Thailand (Suwantarathip and Wichadee, 2014), Korea (Lee, 2013), China (Wang et al. 2016), Indonesia (Alwasilah, 2004; Budiraharjo, 2004; Sukyadi, 2005; Wijaya, 2000). All of the research in collaborative work indicates positive result and confirm the theories that this strategy develops students' writing ability (Budiraharjo, 2004; Wijaya 2000) and confidence (Alwasilah, 2004) and minimises syntactical errors (Sukyadi, 2005).

There are also a number studies focusing on writing process in the area of pedagogical methodology. One is a study on the use of Topic-Based Analysis-Synthesis (TBAS) approach to improve students' English rhetorical strategies (Sulistyo, 1996). The study shows that students need to be aware of the presence of linear patterns in English academic writing. Another technique in teaching writing is using dialogue journal (Cahyono, 1997; Cahyono, 1998). From his study, it can be seen that students responded positively to the use of dialogue journal although it did not improve students' overall writing skill. Other models investigated are Structure-Based Writing Assignments- SBWA (Cahyono and Mukminatien, 2002), lexically-based instruction (Kweldju, 2003), and electronic portfolio or e-portfolio (Soedjatmiko and Taloko, 2003).

In sum, there have numerous studies in writing focusing on writing process. Most of the studies claim that the approaches they implement are effective in improving writing skills particularly fluency,

accuracy, organisation, mechanics, and student confidence in revising their paper. Those studies have been concerned more with looking at students' products to gauge the effectiveness of their approaches. There is little beyond small-scale studies evaluating individual teaching and learning strategies. There is also little research which investigates student feelings about, attitudes to and engagement with their writing. The focus is primarily on teachers implementing aspects of the process approach to writing.

Studies on writing as product focus either on analysing student's writing pieces, assessing students' writing performance, or a combination of both. Studies exploring students' errors in different levels were conducted by many scholars such as Ihsan (1999), Latief (1996), Cahyono (2000), and Henry and Roseberry (2007). Ihsan (1999) attempted to identify the kinds of errors students committed in a "controlled" term paper. His study concluded that students' writing was at minimum professional performance based on the errors found. Latief (1996) found that in terms of rhetorical and coherence qualities, students of a higher level wrote better argumentative essays than the lower levels of students. Yet, there were no differences found in the students' skills in writing persuasive essays in terms of the two qualities. In addition, he also found out that the frequency of grammatical and mechanical errors did not decrease either as the students took more writing courses. Another study examined whether the variables of syntactic knowledge, analytic skill, and paraphrasing skill contributed to the syntactical errors found in university students' compositions (Sukyadi, 2005). Based on his study, syntactical errors could be minimized by the use of collaborative writing, where students edited peers' compositions for revision.

Studies on writing as product have provided much information about students' tendency in making errors and which particular writing skills need to be exposed more to students. However, there remain questions underlying all of the results, such as what lies behind the errors that students made, why students keep doing the same errors in their writing despite the number of writing courses that they take. Studies investigating these two issues in EFL context mainly focus on linguistic aspects such as differences between students' native language and target language they are learning.

Research in genre-based approach has been carried out in different EFL contexts with studies conducted by Liang (2015), Cuiyun (2010), Lee (2012), Najmi (2015), Ibrahim (2013), Yasuda (2011) and Rozimela (2004). These studies confirm the effectiveness of the genre based approach in improving students' interest and cooperation, improving students' language learning efficiency and awareness, stimulating both teachers and students, helping teachers improve their practice, developing positive between students' attitudes and their writing performance, and providing safe, encouraging and non-threatening environment. These findings generally also warn that careful preparation should be made prior to implementing genre-based approach.

In the Indonesian EFL context, Rozimela (2004) explored the role of explicit teaching in improving students' writing. The application of the 2004 English curriculum encouraged her to investigate the effects of the genre-based approach on the students' writing development. Prior to data collection, the students were introduced to modelling of text, joint construction, and independent construction. The research was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, two model texts of argumentative essays were introduced to give opportunity to the students to learn the features of the argumentative genre. In the second stage, the students, with teacher guidance, developed their ideas and organized them as a basis to write them in a complete essay. In the final stage, the students were required to write their own text. The results of the study showed that, through explicit teaching, students were enabled to improve their understanding and skills in using aspects of language needed to develop argumentative essays. In addition, practice in using language in context was essential to activate the students' knowledge about the language and to use it effectively for communicative purposes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has reviewed current issues in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language and research trends in EFL writing in Indonesia. Considering the status of EFL in Indonesia and high demand of students' writing competence in Indonesian higher education, university leaders and teachers need to

create conducive atmosphere to enhance students' involvement in writing tasks and provide facilities for more student-centred learning. In addition, all stakeholders in Indonesian universities should be aware of current development of approaches and techniques of English language teaching in the world and be able to adapt them in accordance with students' need and level of English competence.

There is a strong tradition of research in EFL writing and teaching of writing in Indonesian EFL context. The research purposes are mainly to identify problems faced by students in both L1 and L2 contexts, to explore factors contributing to the success and failure of writing, and to evaluate writing programs developing student writing skills. Discussion on writing approaches and research on writing have long been classified into product, process and genre themes. Instead of classifying them into different boxes, writing should incorporate the insights of product, process, and genre approaches in the teaching of writing to create dynamic and motivating class that will engage the students into their work. Previous studies in the area of writing in EFL context mostly focus on the effectiveness of certain approaches by looking at the result of students' writing. Studies involving students as authors and motivating them to embrace their writing need to be more exposed.

Future researchers are recommended to embark on EFL writing research which investigate topics dealing with psychological and socio-political factors supporting learning of writing, independent learning of writing, student engagement in writing tasks, student engagement involving other stakeholders in university (e.g., teachers, staff, institution), and innovative ways of teaching writing in Indonesian EFL context.

Further research on EFL writing in Indonesian universities also need to address the 'wider umbrella' of EFL writing by investigating how other related factors, such as teachers' and students' perspectives/expectations/goals, local resources, and influence of curriculum development on EFL writing program in Indonesian universities. This would make clear whether the influences existing in Indonesian universities construct or obstruct effective implementation of EFL writing program.

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