Second Language Acquisition
and
English Language Teaching

Editor

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EFL Learners’ Ability in Writing Comparison-Contrast Essays

Abdul Muth'im

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Being able to write well in English might be the hope of every learner of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). By having that kind of ability, the learner has an option in terms of medium of communication and in terms of the target population to whom he or she addresses. In other words, the ability to write in English will broaden the coverage of people he or she wants to communicate to and will give him or her more channels of communication.

Unfortunately, it has been widely claimed by most Indonesian learners of EFL that writing is the most difficult skill to develop. The difficulty not only lies on how to organize ideas in a coherent and unity mode, as it usually happens in all writing practices, but it also lies on the medium in which the message is conveyed. English as the medium of conveying ideas or messages from the writer to the reader is very much different from Indonesian language. The most apparent areas of differences are in vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. As the consequence, the problems the students face in writing in English become doubled as they have to think about the content and about the language.

In helping learners to support an idea or a topic of writing, a number of techniques such as (a) showing facts, (b) describing physical description, (c) giving examples, and (d) telling personal experience have been taught and trained by English teachers. Additionally, some methods of paragraph development like process, extended definition, comparison-contrast, classification, and cause-effect have also been trained to the students by writing teachers (Muth'im, 2009).

The result, however, is not satisfactory yet. A number of studies conducted may become evidence of this claim. For example, the study con-
ducted by Roni (2006) on the students’ competency in writing descriptive paragraph revealed: 40% of the subjects had problems in terms of the topic sentence, 35% of them had problems in the diction, and 25% of the subjects had problems in the description. A research study carried out by Astasari (2009) on grammatical errors in students’ narrative writing found out that the highest frequency was error of omission (41.51%), the second highest frequency was error of malformation (35.50%), the next highest frequency was error of addition (21.74%), and disordered errors came as the lowest frequency (1.3%). Another research conducted by Fitriyah, et al. (2007) found three main types of errors: interlingual errors of inference from the native language, intralingual errors within the target language, and inaccuracies in measuring and appropriating to the sociolinguistic context of communication.

Acquiring the ability in writing is different from acquiring the ability of speaking. As long as one is normal in the sense that he or she is not deaf and dumb and he or she is born and raised in a given language milieu, he or she will surely be able to speak the language. However, there is no guarantee for writing ability. Writing is one of the language skills that should be taught and trained. This is not only true for the second language (L2), but it is also true for students’ native language (L1). Writing in a foreign language (FL) is even more difficult. This is because “writing is not simply a matter of how to write new things down in a new code, but it is the ability to use structures, lexical items, and their conventional representation in ordinary matter of fact of writing” (Omagio, 1986 cited in Zainuddin, 2004). That is why Rivers (1968) suggested, “unless the students are trained systematically, some will never reach a high standard in composition in the foreign language”.

What is meant by writing? Definitions of writing have been given by experts. Rivers (1968), for example, defines writing in different angles. If it is the act of putting down in conventional graphic form of something which has been spoken, it is called notation. If the students are asked to discriminate various sounds, it is called spelling. If it involves students in grammatical exercises, the construction of simple dialogues, and uncomplicated translation exercises, it is called writing practice. When it refers to the expression of ideas in a consecutive way in accordance with the graphic conventions of the language, it is called composition. For Byrne (1984), writing is the production of a sequence of sentences arranged in a particular order and linked together in certain ways. Troyka (1987) defines writing as a way of commu-
nimating a message to a reader for a purpose. Hammond (1989), on the other hand, defines writing as a complex task which requires everything from getting right spelling to making the voice distinctive enough to be heard.

Essay is one form of communicating a message from the writer to the reader. It is a piece of writing containing several paragraphs instead of just one or two paragraphs (Oshima & Hogue, 1983). For Reid (1982), an essay is a series of paragraphs about one subject. The shortest essay at least consists of three paragraphs: introductory paragraph, body (content) paragraph, and concluding paragraph.

To give a clearer picture of the three paragraphs, Reid (1982, cited in Muth’im, 2009) elaborates the three divisions as follows. Introductory paragraph functions to guide or lead the reader(s) to what is going to be discussed in the essay. Its function is to introduce the topic or idea that is going to be written in the whole composition. It consists of two parts: general statement and thesis statement. The use of this general statement is meant to introduce the topic of the essay and to give background information on the topic. Thesis statement, on the other hand, states specific topic and lists major subtopics that will be discussed in the body of the essay. Body (content) paragraph functions to state a topic sentence that is directly related to the thesis, and to support that topic sentence. Concluding paragraph functions to end discussion in the composition. In the concluding paragraph, the writer tells the reader(s) that he or she has completed the essay. This is achieved either by writing a summary of the main points discussed in the body of the essay or by rewriting the thesis statement in different words.

In the past, writing product was categorized into four general types: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. Narrative writing is a kind of writing having intention to narrate events; descriptive writing is a kind of writing having intention to describe person, thing, or feeling; expository writing is a kind of writing having intention to explain or clarify something; and argumentative writing is a kind of writing having intention to persuade other people to do or not to do something by the strength of the writer’s argument (Wishon & Burk, 1987, cited in Muth’im, 2009). At present, some teachers of writing shift their focus to the genres of writing. Widiati (1997) suggests some genres of writing that EFL students should learn, practice and master; they are “jokes, letters to editor, job applications, weather reports, and interviews.”
A comparison-contrast essay belongs to the expository writing category. Comparison is a method of development that basically compares (show likeness) of two people, places, and things that are usually considered different are alike in some ways. The opposite is true of contrast; the essay is written to show how people, places, and things that are often considered very much alike are different in some ways. There are two general ways to organize a comparison-contrast essay. The first is by discussing similarities related to two subjects point by point until it is exhausted, then followed by discussing differences of the same subjects point by point until it is exhausted. The second is by discussing the two subjects alternatively. For example, first the writer discusses one thing, and then he or she discusses another thing. This is done until all the similarities or differences of the two subjects are discussed thoroughly.

Based on the above discussion, this study is aimed at answering two questions. They are: (1) how is the ability of the EFL students in writing an argumentative essay using comparison and contrast methods of development, and (2) what writing problems do the EFL students have in writing English?

METHOD

This study is descriptive in nature. Descriptive study is a method of research which aims to describe existing conditions without analyzing relationships among variables (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). In this study the conditions that are going to be described are (1) the ability of EFL students in writing an argumentative essay by using comparison and contrast methods of development, and (2) the problems the students have in writing English.

The subjects of this study were the Regular B class students, who were taking Writing IV course, of the English Department of Lambung Mangkurat University, Banjarmasin. The number of students taking this course were 14 students and they all became the subjects of this study. The course had 4 credit-semester units with two meetings each week. There were two competencies that should be developed in this course: (1) the understanding of the essence of an essay, and (2) the ability to write different kinds of essays.

A writing test was used as the instrument to get the data. The subjects were asked to write two essays. One essay should be developed by using comparison and the other one should be developed by contrast method of development. Then the essays were analyzed by using ESL Composition
Profile proposed by Jacobs, et al. (1981). This profile analyzed writing task on five components of writing: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

The total number of the five aspects was used to show the overall ability of students in writing. To find problems of writing argumentative essay using comparison-contrast development method, the researcher described the errors made in each aspect by referring to the guidelines of analytic model of scoring. This score was then changed into scores ranging from 10 to 100.

RESULTS

The analysis of the writing assignments of the students on argumentative essays developed by using comparison and contrast method can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. The Result of Writing on Comparison and Contrast Essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 9</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 10</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 11</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 12</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 13</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 14</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1016</strong></td>
<td><strong>982</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>72.57</strong></td>
<td><strong>70.14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that the mean for the comparison essay is 72.57, while the mean score for the contrast essay is 70.14. The ability of the students in writing essays developed by using comparison and contrast methods can be summarized as follows:
Table 2. Summary of the Ability of Students in Writing Essay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≥ 80</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 - 79.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 - 74.9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 - 69.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 - 64.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 - 59.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 - 54.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that the ability of the students in writing an essay by using comparison and contrast method of development are: 4 students (28.57%) of the subjects got score 80 or more for comparison and 1 student (7.14%) for contrast; 2 students (14.29%) got score between 75-79.9 for comparison and 2 students (14.29%) for contrast; there were 4 students (28.57%) who got score between 70-74.9 for comparison and 5 students (35.71%) for contrast; there was 1 student (7.14%) who got score between 65-69.9 for comparison and 3 students (21.43%) for contrast; there was 1 student (7.14%) who got scores between 60-64.9 for comparison and 2 students (14.29%) for contrast; there was 1 student (7.14%) who got score between 55-59.9 for comparison and 1 student (7.14%) for contrast. Finally, there was 1 student (7.14%) who got score between 50-54.9 for comparison, but none for contrast.

From the analysis on students’ writing on the components of writing, it was discovered that most of the students had problems on them. The detail problems of each component of writing can be seen in Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Table 3. The Ability of Students in Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 - 27</td>
<td>Excellent to very good</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 22</td>
<td>Good to average</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 17</td>
<td>Fair to poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 - 13</td>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows that 3 students (21.42%) were categorized as excellent to very good in content; 7 students (50.00%) were categorized as good to average; 2 students (14.29%) were categorized as fair to poor; and 2 students (14.29%) were categorized as very poor.

Table 4. The Ability of Students on Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 - 18</td>
<td>Excellent to very good</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 - 14</td>
<td>Good to average</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 10</td>
<td>Fair to poor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - 7</td>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that there was no student (0.00%) who was categorized as excellent to very good and very poor in organization; 9 students (64.29%) were categorized as good to average; 5 students (35.71%) were categorized as fair to poor.

Table 5. The Ability of Students on Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 - 18</td>
<td>Excellent to very good</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 - 14</td>
<td>Good to average</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 10</td>
<td>Fair to poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - 7</td>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows that 7 students (50.00%) were categorized as excellent to very good in vocabulary; 7 students (50.00%) were categorized as good to average; and there was no one categorized as either fair to poor or very poor.

Table 6. The Ability of Students on Language Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 - 22</td>
<td>Excellent to very good</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 18</td>
<td>Good to average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 - 11</td>
<td>Fair to poor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 - 5</td>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 indicates that there is none (0.00%) of the students who was categorized as excellent to very good in language use; 6 students (42.86%) were categorized as good to average; 8 students (57.14%) were categorized as fair to poor; and none of students was categorized as very poor.

Table 7. The Ability of Students on Mechanics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Excellent to Very good</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Good to average</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fair to poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 indicates that 6 students (42.86%) were categorized as excellent to very good in mechanics; 7 students (50.00%) were categorized as good to average; 1 student (7.14%) was categorized as fair to poor; and none of the students was categorized as very poor.

DISCUSSION

According to the Academic Regulation of Lambung Mangkurat University, score 80 or above is equal with A and is categorized as excellent; score between 75 – 79.9, is equal to B+ and is categorized as very good; score between 70 – 74.9 is equal with B and is categorized as good; score between 65 – 69.9 is equal with C+ and is categorized as fair; score between 60 – 64.9 is equal with C and is categorized as average; score between 55 – 59.9 is equal with D+ and is categorized as bad; score between 50 – 54.9 is equal with D and is categorized as very bad, and finally score under 50 is equal with E and is categorized as failure or the worst.

Based on that regulation, the result of students’ writing can be claimed as successful in the sense that among 14 students involved in the study, there were only 2 students (14.29%) who failed to reach the passing grade. The rests, as many as 12 students (85.71%) were successful in reaching the passing grade. Interestingly, as many as 4 students got score 80 or more. This means that there were 4 students who got an A.

However, seen from the mastery of the course or lesson, the result of the mastery of components of writing does not seem to be satisfactory. This is because of the policy of the University in giving score to students'
achievement is based on the percentage of mastery. For example, if one student masters 80% of the course materials, he or she has the right to get an A. If a student masters 75% up to 79.9% of the learning materials, he or she has the right to get a B+. If a student masters 70% up to 74.9% of the instructional materials he or she has the right to get a B. If a student masters 65% up to 69.9% of the course materials he or she has the right to get a C+. And if a student masters 60% up to 64.9% of the competence he or she has the right to get a C, the minimal score of passing grade.

In addition, the mean scores of the two kinds of writing show 72.57 and 70.12 respectively. Why the mean score in the comparison essay is higher than the one in the contrast essay might be related to the topics they were assigned to write. In comparison essay, the students were asked to compare “a flower” and “a girl” for male students, and to compare “a bee” and “a boy” for female students. This topic seemed to make students interested very much. For the contrast essay, they were asked to contrast the English Department where they are studying now and the English Department of other institutions they know.

The percentage of mastery enables the students not to have mastered the course materials completely 100%. This means that there are some percentages of instructional materials that are not mastered by the students yet. From the analysis of the results of students writing, it is discovered that the problems the students still had were in the aspects of content, organization, and language use.

In the aspect of content, there were only 3 students (21.42%) who fulfilled the requirements of good essay in that the content of the essay is knowledgeable, substantive, and relevant to the assigned topic. This means that among the 14 students involved in the study, only three of them could develop the topic assigned into an essay satisfactorily in that it had a general statement and a thesis statement, both of which lead to a cohesive and united idea. The ideas stated in the thesis statement were adequately developed and supported by relevant supporting ideas. Seven of the students (50.00%) apparently had some adequate knowledge of the topic. However, in developing the assigned topic they were not as good as the first group. For instance, the thesis statement that they developed lacked detail. Two students (14.29%) had limited knowledge of the topic they were assigned to write, so that the substance of their writing was not discussed thoroughly, and the topic was developed inadequately. Two other students (14.29%)
did not show their knowledge of the topic they were discussing. As the results, the writing they produced did not show the substance of the topic.

The data collected showed that all of the students had problems in organization. There were no students who could express the ideas fluently. They failed to show which ideas belong to the general statement as background and which ideas belong to the thesis statement that will guide them to discuss in the body paragraph(s). They also failed to organize the ideas in a well-organized and logical manner. Some students did not even divide their groups ideas into paragraphs. They put all the ideas in a single paragraph. The largest number of students, i.e., 9 students (64.29%) had fewer problems in organization. The problems they had in organization were indicated by the writing which was somewhat choppy with loose ideas. Although the main ideas still stood out, the ideas which were not supported well and the sequence of ideas which was logical but incomplete. Some students, i.e., 5 students (35.71%) could not express their ideas fluently. In addition, the ideas they wrote were confusing and disconnected, and the sequence and the development of ideas were organized less logically.

In terms of language use, none of the students reached the criteria of excellent to very good. They had problems in writing effective complex construction. The problems they mostly had were agreement, tense, number, word order, article, pronoun and preposition. Among these 14 students, only six of them (42.86%) were able to write a complex construction with minor problems. However, they could write a simple construction effectively. They also made several errors in agreement, tense, number, word order, article, pronoun and preposition though these errors did not obscure the meaning. Mostly, i.e., 8 students (57.14%) had major problems either in a simple or complex construction. They also made frequent errors in negation, agreement, tense, number, word order, article, pronoun, preposition, fragment sentence, run-on sentence, and deletion. Consequently, the meaning was obscured or confusing.

CONCLUSION

Based on the finding and the discussion above, it can be concluded that, in general, the ability of EFL students in writing argumentative essays developed by comparison and contrast methods of development was satisfying in the sense that among 14 students involved in the study, 12 students (85.71%) ranging from excellent to average category could reach the pass-
ing grade (60 or more) stipulated by the University. However, seen from the mastery of the five components of writing, that is, content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanic, the students still had problems, especially in content, organization, and language use. Among these three problems, the most serious problems they had were in organization and language use. None of them reached the level of excellent to very good in these two categories.

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