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LEARNERS' LANGUAGE CHALLENGES IN WRITING ENGLISH

Barli Bram¹

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¹ Barli Bram, M.Ed., Ph.D. < barli@usd.ac.id > +62274513301 ext 1331 teaches at the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. This paper was presented at the Language and Language Teaching International Conference 2009 held by Prince of Songkla University, Thailand.

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by Bram Barli

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Key words: *common language issue, minimum requirements, grammar-oriented, paragraph*

INTRODUCTION

Apparently, writing English grammatically (and semantically) can be tough, extremely challenging for learners of the target language. How to use articles and prepositions correctly, for example, still continues to remain problematic. It is true that when writing in English, the target language, the main objective of the learners is to convey their messages. In other words, "what counts most is to get our messages across" (Bram 2002:25). To some extent, the statement might be interpreted that grammatical mistakes may be tolerated. Is this a plausible approach for us to adopt? In this paper, some common language problems faced by (beginning) writers are described. Suggestions for tackling the problems are also put forward.

It is presumed that the common linguistic issues discussed here are also applicable to many other beginning writers in different places or countries.

Nevertheless, the learners here mainly refer to, firstly, undergraduate students of the English Education Programme, and secondly, students or participants of the English Extension Course of Sanata Dharma University Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The students belonging to the first group (English Education Programme students) are trained to become English teachers, and have studied English at school for at least six years, namely, three years at junior high school and another three years at senior high school. On the whole, English lessons at high school focus more on grammar points, vocabulary items and reading skills. The other language skills, namely, listening, speaking and writing, seemingly tend to receive less attention due to various reasons and limitations, for

instance, the national examinations which stress reading comprehension and grammatical knowledge, and teachers' insufficient spoken proficiency. The students of the second group (English Extension Course students) are mostly university students majoring in various fields, such as engineering and psychology, and have studied English for over six years.

SOME LANGUAGE ISSUES OR CHALLENGES IN WRITING

The following three tables list a number of language problems faced by learners of English when writing English, including paragraph writing. Though the sources are different, the lists show some similarities and differences. In the first table, Ferris (2003: 149) suggests a condense list of error categories made by learners. The five types of errors are then unsurprisingly also covered in Table 2 (Chen 2002:74) and Table 3. It may be said that Table 2 contains two types of errors not specifically covered by Tables 1 and 3, namely, relative clauses and redundancy. Further, as can be seen, Table 3 inventories three specific error categories which are absent in Tables 1 and 2, namely, spelling, punctuation and sentence level (fragments, comma splices and fused sentences). It should be pointed out that firstly Ferris' (2003) five classifications of errors are a 'concise' version of Ferris' *et al.* (2000) 'comprehensive' list of errors, which consist of 15 types.

Ferris *et al.* (2000) identified more than "5,700 errors marked by three ESL writing teachers on 146 texts written by 92 college-level ESL composition students. The marks ... were classified into 15 different categories..." (Ferris 2003:148). In Ferris' opinion (2003:149), the concise version is easier, less daunting to implement, and yet² without losing much information about student errors". Secondly, Chen (2002) investigated the characteristics and

problems faced by Taiwanese² EFL students when writing English at university, by engaging 28 first and third year students. The participants were assigned to write a reflection with the theme 'My problems when writing in English'. The writing problems mentioned by the students were then grouped "by identifying key ideas and by counting the frequency with which they occur in the students' reports" (Chen 2002:59). It should be pointed out that the lists in Tables 1 and 3 below do not show any rankings of error types faced by the learners. Table 2, however, presents error types based on the frequency of occurrence.

³

No.	Error Type
1	Verb errors
2	Noun ending errors
3	Article errors
4	Word choice errors
5	Sentence structure errors

Table 1: Error Types
(Ferris 2003:149)

²

No.	Errors in order	Frequency
1	Word usage	118
2	Tense	58
3	Definite article	54
4	Prepositions	39
5	Verbs	32
6	Number, sing/pl	25
7	Relative clauses	18
8	Redundancy	17

Table 2: Types and Frequency of Errors
(Chen 2002:74)

No.	Language Problem	Note
1	Prepositions	<i>for, with, on, in</i> ...
2	Articles	<i>a, an, the</i>
3	Finite Verbs	
4	Concord (Agreement)	subject- verb,number- noun
5	Tenses	
6	Spelling	
7	Punctuation	comma, full stop ...
8	Diction (Word Choice)	
9	Sentence Level, ie fragments, comma splices and run-on sentences	

Table 3: List of Language Problems

Note: Expanded based on the Minimum Requirements, which originally consists of seven categories of problems

Based on the observations of the (paragraph) writing classes and of the collected data (students' compositions: 1. expanding a story about a fox based on the given key words for the English Extension Course students and 2. writing an opinion piece, two or three paragraphs long for the English Education Programme students), the writer believes that the nine types of language problems, or rather challenges, as listed in Table 3 (expanded based on the **Minimum Requirements** which used to be officially applied by the English Education Programme of Sanata Dharma University), ought to be made explicit (particularly to the students of the English Extension Course and of the English Education Programme of Sanata Dharma University). By doing so, the students know their common linguistic challenges in writing, which

will then help them to directly pay attention to the issues in order to better their writing in the future. It might be a good idea, therefore, to have a closer look at the nine points listed in Table 3 above.

A. Prepositions

Based on the data (Bram 2005), namely the compositions written by approximately 50 students, representing two writing classes at Sanata Dharma University, the common preposition mistakes may be classified into three types. In the context, the students consisted of two groups.

The first group, Writing A of the English Extension Course (EEC), had 20 learners, and the second one, Writing V of the English Education Programme, consisted of 30 students. The three types of problems involving prepositions are as follows. The asterisk * means unacceptability.):

- (1) ***similar with**, instead of **similar to** (incorrect preposition)
- (2) ***reply your message**, instead of **reply to your message** (missing preposition)
- (3) ***discuss about our plans**, instead of **discuss our plans** (unnecessary preposition)

It is concluded that the above prepositional problems were triggered by "the interference of Indonesian, Malay or other languages/dialects spoken by the students. In other words, it seemed that multilingualism played a role in leading learners to produce such ungrammatical, yet understandable, sentences in their writing" (Bram 2005: 1).

B. Articles

Using English articles correctly is obviously a serious challenge for every learner of the target language. The three members, namely the indefinite articles *a* and *an*, and the definite one *the*, can indeed cause a 'headache'. Although articles seldom bring about misunderstanding, a piece of writing containing numerous mistakes in the use or non-use of articles in an academic setting should not be seen as trivial. Examples of problems involving articles are:

- (4) **We have just received **an** information from them.*
(unnecessary *an*)
- (5) **Susan has kind uncle.* (missing *a*)
- (6) **Recently they have met **a** honest person.* (incorrect *a*,
correct: *an*)
- (7) **Who is prime minister of Thailand?* (missing *the*)

C. Finite Verbs

What is meant by a **finite verb**? Well, it refers to the verb of a sentence which undergoes a change or which is affected if the subject, form or tense of the sentence changes. For instance, the words *have* and *does/did* act as finite verbs in the following sentences:

- (8) *All participants **have** been informed about the schedule.* (statement)
- (9) ***Have** all participants been informed about the schedule?* (question)
- (10) *The stranger **does** not mean to cause any trouble.*
(negation, present)

- (11) **Does** the stranger not mean to cause any trouble?
(question)
- (12) *The stranger **did** not mean to cause any trouble.*
(negation, past)

In general, the most common problem regarding a finite verb in writing is its non-use or absence where the context requires its presence. Examples of such problems are:

- (13) **My friends already tired and hungry.*
- (14) **They not recognize the new member.*
- (15) **Tim, Linda and Helen good friends.*
- (16) **What you doing right now?*

D. Concord or Agreement

There are two kinds of concord or agreement, namely, the subject-finite verb concord and the number-noun concord. Possible problems are:

- (17) **Some children is very talkative.*
- (18) **I have three good dictionary.*
- (19) **Her cousin drink milk every day.*
- (20) **Several week ago, they won a competition.*

E. Tenses

In this context, the problems of tenses may refer to inconsistency in using tenses or shifting to a different tense without a strong reason. Examples of such issues are:

- (21) *Last weekend, we went the zoo.*We see many zebras there.*
- (22) **Bangkok was the capital of Thailand. It is a beautiful city.*
- (23) **They cancelled the match because it is raining heavily.*

F. Spelling

Undoubtedly it is often tough to correctly spell certain English words. If students can work using a computer, the spelling check tool is an invaluable resource. Dictionaries are certainly an excellent helper as well, providing the students have willingness to consult them. Here are examples of spelling problems:

- (24) **acomodation* instead of *accommodation*
- (25) **commitee*, instead of *committee*
- (26) **unforgetable*, instead of *unforgettable*

G. Punctuation

While it is true that in general the non-use of punctuation in a sentence might not completely prevent communications, it does not mean punctuation errors should be tolerated. It is the responsibility of the writer to say or indicate explicitly what she or he intends to get across. Thus, if a statement, for instance, is intended, the writer then should use a full stop to explicitly mark the end of the statement. Why does a punctuation problem occur in a composition or paragraph? Argante (2004:3) offers the following explanation: "Because grammar and punctuation are used in written language, we forget they are based on the verbal patterns of speech. Think of a comma, a semi-colon; a full stop. They are indicators of a pause -

each merely a different length of time". Here are examples of punctuation problems in writing:

(27) **Next Tuesday there will be an exam* (no full stop or period [.])

(28) **The class is over the room is now empty.* (no period [...] after the word *over*, as a possible explanation)

(29) **Is everyone ready now* (no question mark [?])

H. Diction or Word Choice

Another common issue which learners of English encounter is choosing the right or appropriate words to express themselves, in particular when they try to use low frequency words, for example, the ones beyond the first 3,000. The writer agrees with Nation (2008:83) when he says that "Work in the simplification of texts has shown that a small number of words (around 2,000 to 3,000) can be used effectively to express an enormous number of ideas". In some contexts, the diction issue seems to overlap with collocations. Examples of diction problems are:

(30) **national resurrection day*, instead of *national awakening day*

(31) **make homework*, instead of *do homework*

(32) **to change information with one another*, instead of *to exchange information with one another*

I. Sentence Level

It should be noted that a fragment is a dependent clause or part of a complete sentence. Thus, grammatically and semantically a fragment is not a sentence yet, and should be avoided in writing.

The main trouble of a fragment is that it does not express a complete thought. Examples of fragments are:

- (33) **When we try to say something.*
- (34) **After they presented their papers.*
- (35) **Although it was raining.*

A comma splice may be defined as a learner's mistake in combining two or more sentences using a comma. Frequently, it requires rereading in order to understand the intended message expressed in a comma splice. In short, a comma splice might hinder communications. Examples of comma splices which should be avoided are:

- (36) **The host welcomed the guests warmly, everyone was enthusiastic.*
- (37) **My friends played football, I decided to take a walk, we enjoyed ourselves a lot.*
- (38) **Some shoes are quite costly, students might need to save money first if they want to buy them.*

Next, a run-on or fused sentence may be defined as a construction or situation where two or more sentences are combined without using any punctuation. Normally, it is harder to understand a run-on sentence in a composition than a comma splice. The reason is that in the first place the reader has to find out where a sentence ends and the next one starts. Thus, when writing in English, it is essential then to avoid a fused sentence. Here are three examples of fused sentences:

- (39) **The wind blew very hard for hours the trees and the lamp posts fell down.*

(40) **It was dark outside no one seemed to be around we went home earlier.*

(41) **After the speakers presented their papers in the third session all participants had a break the next session was scheduled to begin at two o'clock.*

WHAT STEPS TO TAKE

In section two above, nine main categories of language problems faced by student writers have been examined and commented on. Now, it is time to ask ourselves what can or should be done to tackle the challenges effectively. Realistically, there perhaps exists no quick or magical fix. One possible initial step is to (re)implement the so-called **Minimum Requirements**, which were once used by the English Education Programme of Sanata Dharma University Yogyakarta (quoted below with permission).

1. Concord
2. Finite verbs
3. Tenses
4. Verb groups
5. Articles
6. Punctuation
7. Spelling

To some extent, the original version of the Minimum Requirements is more 'user-friendly' for both the students and the writing teacher to implement because the seven types of errors may be regarded as 'basic issues'.

Another plausible measure is to apply the expanded list given in Table 3, which consists of nine categories (relisted here): 1. Prepositions, 2. Articles, 3. Finite Verbs, 4. Concord (Agreement), 5. Tenses, 6. Spelling, 7. Punctuation, 8 Diction (Word Choice) and

9. Sentence Level, namely, fragments, comma splices and run-on sentences. The last two categories, namely numbers 8 and 9, may be seen as more abstract and more complex for learners to overcome.

The main idea of the (expanded) Minimum Requirements is that the students should do their utmost to avoid making the listed mistakes in their written work. If a student's work contains very few language problems, the mark will be increased considerably. If a student's written work has many mistakes listed in the Minimum Requirements, the mark will then be reduced very much. The worst consequence faced by a student is to fail the writing class in question.

1 It should be stressed once again that this kind of grammar-oriented writing is not for the sake of grammar itself. It is already mentioned that the primary objective of writing is to convey messages, to communicate with readers. In this case, language elements or aspects play a crucial role in enabling learners to write English successfully. It is realized that writing is more than language elements, as Bacha (2002:17) points out that writing involves "language (sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, coherence, mechanics), organization (format, logical order of ideas, thesis and topic sentence), and content (major and minor supporting ideas)". The last two main key aspects of writing, namely, organization and content, are, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

The writer supports Chen's (2002:75) idea that "... we need to recognize the value of error analysis in diagnosing students' individual errors, then helping them identify the 2 weaknesses and cope with those problems". For this purpose, a list of common language issues in writing will prove indispensable (For more detail, see Table 3, for example).

As mentioned earlier, it is realistic not to expect a quick fix or solution to language problems in writing. Writing is not simply an instant product, but it is also a process. As a product, a piece of writing, as Costas (2002:5) points out, should contain the following good elements regarding the language aspects:

1. "correct and consistent spelling" (eg British and American spellings)
2. "accurate and appropriate use of grammar and syntax"
3. "accurate and appropriate use, as well as a good range, of vocabulary"

And as a process, writing involves, for instance, brainstorming, drafting, cooling down, editing, revising, proofreading and finalizing. Each of these phases requires energy, time and thinking.

It should also be realized that grammar-oriented writing (by implementing the expanded Minimum Requirements, for example) is not free from shortcomings. Ferris and Hedgcock (1998: 209), for instance, say that "Dealing with student errors in written work can be tedious, tiring, and frustrating. This is no doubt why researchers have found that teachers are often erratic and even inaccurate in providing grammar feedback on student writing".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To wrap up this paper, here are the concluding remarks. Firstly, language aspects, such as, concord and finite verbs, deserve serious attention in order to enable learners to express their messages grammatically and effectively. Secondly, it is a good idea to come up with a list of common language challenges or problems faced by learners. Thirdly, it is realized that writing English is

much more than constructing grammatically acceptable sentences. Finally, writing is a process and product, requiring energy.

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