INVESTIGATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LARNERS’ DIFFICULTIES WHILE COMPOSING WRITING IN L2

A THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fullfilment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Sarjana Pendidikan

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION
FACULTY OF LANGUAGE AND ARTS
UNIVERSITAS KRISTEN SATYA WACANA
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ABSTRACT

Since English has become one of important skill in this era of Globalization, education setting in all countries introduces English as one of course provided for learners. To investigate the needs and obstacles that learners may find during the learning, this research is attempted to answer the question of the difficulties that learners find during the writing process. By referring to Kellogg (1994) and Matsuhashi (1987) theory of cognitive process and pause revision, this study explored learners’ difficulties during the process of writing in English learning (L2). Using SRP as the data collection tools, five learners from one of Senior High Schools in Salatiga were selected as the participants. The findings show that the learners experienced difficulties in writing process, grammatical and vocabularies during the process of writing. The study posed these problem faced by learners to teachers in order to decrease learners inability in using the skills particularly writing skill properly.

Keywords: SRP, pause and revision, writing process, grammar, vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Writing is an important skill in educational setting, especially in English learning (L2) in Indonesia context. Even though L2 writing is very common in L2 classroom, it is unavoidable that writing in L2 is still challenging for students. Students may find difficulties in L2 writing process, especially because they have to write using another language. The difficulty lies on the notion that writing is ongoing process and learners suffer from what so-called as L1 interference while writing in their L2.

This interference occurs in many forms; it is not limited on the syntactical or grammatical level (Maros et al, 2007), but also in broader levels e.g. planning, mode, and context (van Weijen, 2009). In addition, Li (2007) finds that students have difficulties linguistically in choosing vocabulary or using the correct form of grammar and unfamiliarity with structure of the text. Having to deal with
grammar rule, lack of vocabularies, text organization, correct citation and reference are common difficulties that L2 students have in L2 writing. Lack of vocabulary knowledge is also an obstacle since students cannot develop a critical argument; instead they are only able to write simple sentences only. In order to overcome this problem, students may have some strategies to use during their writing to overcome the difficulties. Strategies that may be used are in line with the argument of Flower & Hayes (1981) that writing is seen as a process, not a product base.

One approach to investigate writing problem especially in L2 writing is through process-based approach. Process-based approach focuses on editing or revising areas of error in writing (Hyland, 2003). Adopting this kind of approach, this study was conducted in Salatiga with some Senior High School students. Using Stimulated Recall Protocol (SRP) method after participants wrote some paragraphs about selected topics. Different from some previous studies that only investigated writing products, this study was aimed to probe more information about students’ difficulties and problems that were occurred while composing their writing in L2. In other words, this research only focused on what were the English language learners’ writing difficulties while composing writing in L2. In other words, this study wanted to answer the research question: “What are difficulties English language learners find in composing writing in L2?” Hopefully, the result of the study can help English teachers in compensating their students and giving appropriate treatment such as clear explanation about the problems that emerge during the writing or learning process in order to make students understand and able to solve their problems in writing in English.
LITERATURE REVIEW

L2 Writing and Cognitive process

In second language writing (L2 Writing), the writer always deals with negotiation of meaning (Foster, 2005). The brain will recall the innate while the writer starts composing the writing. It is also interesting that first language of the writer will give either positive or negative transfer towards the L2 writing process. Writing is a process that involves cooperation of the brain and knowledge. Writing goes with choosing dictation, syntactic pattern, organizational pattern, content, and purpose (Odell et. al. as cited in Flower & Hayes, 1981). The process might follow a selection of the lexical, semantical, or topical aspect in order to compose a noticeable writing. Flower & Hayes (1981) notes that the writing phase is also divided into some parts, to answer basic questions what, where, how or use writing strategies such as the accurateness of coherency in text, do pre-writing and free writing. They also argue that pre writing, writing, and revising are the major process during the writing stage.

On the one hand, Bitzer (as cited in Flower & Hayes, 1981) highlights the importance of conversation between writers and readers. Writing is not mainly about the harmony of the lexical aspects but also needs to be more alive. However, Vatz (1973) comes with ideas that the conversation takes place in the writing is the result of writers' imagination, which means the writers can lead the conversation. Since writers have dominant power in the composition of writing, it is unavoidable that there may be writers’ biases that may affect the content and language quality of writing.
Apparently, Flower & Hayes (1981) believe that writing is part of a long cognitive process that needs extra struggle to accomplish and art that combine lexis and content into a coherent unit. The judgment whether a good writing is about the syntactic aspects or the semantics part depends on the context. Cognitively, different background knowledge may give a big contribution to the writing which incorporates with the content of the text. Language awareness of the writers may affect the smoothness sense of each paragraph as well. Hence, it could be different point of view in judging which writing is seen as a nutshell.

In addition, in the writing process, one main problem that learners encounter as one of difficulty aspects is language. It is a process where a person transfers L1 knowledge to L2 (Richards et al. (1992); Dulay et al. (1982); Ellis (1997:51 as cited in Brown, 1987). L1 interference may influence and cause the negative transfer to the process of making and producing discourse or text. Merely transfer L1 to L2 will lead to negative transfer and it influences the quality of texts such as acceptable meaning, neutrality, and appropriate linguistic structure (Hussein and Mohammad, 2012). L1 interference happens because there is difference between L1 and L2. Negative transfer occurs when a learner transfers L1 structures that is not exist in L2 (Hussein and Mohammad, 2012). Learners use the ability to transfer L1 structure that mostly different and do not found in L2 structure. Hence, the transfer of language can interfere the process of writing particularly for writing in L2.

**Pauses and Revisions**

Writing is a process. Students mostly believe that writing is about selecting ideas and verbalizing them into sentences (Susser, 1994). When students are aware that writing is a process, they will understand that “ideas are generated
and not only transcribed” (Susser, 1994 p. 35). Most students do not realize in the process of writing, they often use strategy. Hence, in the writing composition, focus on the process has been highlighted as the major source for research (Miller & Sullivan, 2006). The process of writing may involve some performance in mind that affect the behavior of the writers. According to Kellogg (1994), the performance of writing can be seen by the result of writing, direct assessing, writing fluency, and time allocation. One way to measure writing performance is process-based approach that mainly focuses on pauses and revisions. Matsuhashi as cited in Kellogg, 1994), finds that most of writers use pause during writing process. From the previous researches, it can be drawn a conclusion that writers mostly pause during the writing. The time duration may be various, depending on the proficiency of the writers or the selected topics. Pauses in writing also be categorized as strategy since writers introspect their writing during the pause (Kellogg, 1994).

During the pause, students often revise their writing. Revision can be one good way to discover mistakes such as grammar error, illogical sentence, citation, and ambiguity (Hayes, Flower, Schriver, Statman, & Carey, 1987 as cited in Lindgren & Sullivan, 2002). Revision occurs when students revise to improve their writing into a well-organized pattern. Students need to be aware of the mistakes and use the appropriate plan to improve their writing according to the detected mistakes (Lindgren & Sullivan, 2002).

**Process-based Approach**

There have been some studies that investigated writing process towards pauses and revisions. Wenyu & Yang (2008) did a research on correlations among
writing proficiency, writing strategy, and writing scores to three groups of college students that have different time experience of learning L2. It is found that strategy used by L2 learners and non L2 writers are almost similar; both L2 and non-L2 writers do not pay attention to coherency of the text and pauses occur during the writing to decide the writing ideas of the text. However, L2 writers pay attention to content of the text and non-L2 writers focus on lexical and grammar of the language and also tend to translate after decide the idea. Another research that is conducted by Schellens and Waes (2002) investigated pause and revision during writing process compared to handwriting and computer typing examination to 40 faculty and graduate students. The study shows that writing using computer typing writing tends to focus on the overall content of writing, less attention to language component in example: grammar and letter, and less systematic revision for overall text before finishing the writing. However, on the other hand, the result from handwriting writing process indicates that the draft planning, longer pause interval, and higher degree of revisions occurrences. From these two researches, during writing process, pause and revision occurs naturally for both learners; L2 and non-L2 writers. It is unavoidable that writing process is inseparable with pause and revision. Here, the cognitive aspect contributes in this pause-revision occurrence. As Kellogg (1994) mentions that the cognitive ability of human will naturally prepare, analyze, and revise in the meantime of writing.
THE STUDY

Context of the Study

This study is a qualitative study in which the initial assumption is analyzed in general as a complete part and involved small number of participants (Zakarias, 2013). The qualitative study probed more information, describe the condition, and present the data in words. This study took place in Salatiga with selected public Senior High School where English has been a compulsory subject especially for Senior High School students. The English course approximately runs for five hours in a week.

Participants

The total number consisted of five participants; all of them were in the same institution grade 11. They approximately had been learning English since Elementary School. The participants also learned four language skill such as writing, speaking, listening, and reading. Therefore with their past experiences and background knowledge of English, it was possible to investigate their ability in using the L2 skills particularly writing skill.

Instrument of Data Collection

Screen Recording Software

The data collection used Mirillis Action (version 2.0.2.0) as the screen recorder. The screen recorder enables the researcher to see pause and revision during the writing process.
Figure 1. A screenshot of the video recording of a participant’s writing process using Mirillis Action software

**Keystroke Logging Software**

Keystroke logging was helpful since it can record all details of the writing activity (Miller & Sullivan, 2006). By using keystroke logging method, it will decrease the number of face to face interaction especially in some cases, the writer mostly feel uncomfortable while in the process of composing a writing text he or she is waited by the researcher. Using Refog Keylogger (version) 8.3.0 software, the researcher can see the entire process of writing history where the learners as the participants make during the writing process. The software also provides data that can be combined with pause and revision from the screen recording video so the researcher could investigate the writing process from process-based approach.
Stimulated Recal Protocol

SRP is a method used to probe more information and description of the writing process without explicit video recording since the author needs to set the software in the computer and the program will run with a hidden camera. The participants will not realize and the data taking process will come naturally and objectively. This study focused on the pause and revision of the participants and dig more information about the reason they pause while compose the writing such as questioning why and how the participants changed the sentence(s) during the pause.

This study was adapted from Wenyu and Yang’s (2008) and Sumakul’s (2010) methodology. The participants were asked to compose writing individually with the aid such as a notebook with an installed-SRP application and monitor recording that had been prepared by the author. The participants will re-watch the recording of his or her writing process right after finishing the writing. Following questions were asked when pauses occurred in the meantime of writing process.

The time allocation for each individual spent 30 to 60 minutes for the writing process and question-answer session. The topic depended on the
participants since they were learning particular topic such as narrative, recount, and procedure text genres. The participants freed to decide the topic that they were comfortable with, so the obstacles in the writing process could prevent the participants from writing without adequate background information from particular topics. During the writing process, the participants were allowed to look up the dictionary so they were not burdened in the writing process.

**Data Analysis**

Adapting the methodology from Wenyu and Yang’s (2008) and Sumakul (2010) study, the data analysis took some steps to be applied in this study. First, each of participants composed writing with the participants’ self-chosen topics. The time allocation for the writing process took no longer than thirty minutes. After completing the writing, the recording was shown to the participants and question-answer session began during the watching video recording process. In the mean time of watching the recording, the researcher asked question related to the research question to the participants. The data from question and answer session or the interview session was recorded using tape recorder. The question(s) focused on pause and revision during the writing process. The pause and revision reflected to the participants’ mind process during the composing their writing. When being asked by the researcher about the genre of the text, all five participants chose narrative genre as the focus of writing. Compared with other genre texts, narrative text was seen to be friendly for Senior High School L2 learners.
Findings and Discussion

In this section, the data analysis is presented. The data was analyzed using methodology adapted from Sumakul (2010). Due to the efficiencies of the discussion, only some transcripts were presented as the examples of the analysis.

The participants’ data of writing log was taken from Refog Keylogger and the pause and revision occurrences was seen from the SRP video recording. However, since the video recording could not be transcribed in a written form, the writing key log as the process of writing and the video recording screen was added marks of pause (P) and revision (R) to indicate the participants’ process of writing to be analyzed.

![Figure 3. The example of pause and revision made during the writing.]

Figure 3. The example of pause and revision made during the writing.

The Pause (P16) is the longer stop interval time which is marked by P and the number followed (16) is the 16th pause made by the participant (01, 02, ..., 16, 17). Along with the pause, revision is marked by R and the number of revision made is signed by the number followed (01, 02, 03)
Findings

The difficulties that occurred during the writing process were presented in this section. The learners might make mistakes during the process of writing, however this research only investigated the learners’ difficulties in the area of writing process rather than writing product. Hence, the errors that occurred without revision from the learners in the writing product were not discussed. In addition, there might be some unstructured sentences that the learners were not aware of. Hereby, the researcher only focused on the learners’ difficulties during the process of writing.

Table 1 figure 4

Findings of Learners’ Difficulties in Writing in L2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Difficulties</th>
<th>Number of Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Writing Process</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table above was the result from difficulties that mostly occurred in the process of writing. The difficulties and the number of occurrences were listed from the most frequent happened to the least frequent occurred. The difficulties such as writing process, grammar, and vocabulary learners found it difficult to deal with

Writing Process
During the SRP it was observed that learners faced difficulties in starting the writing such as paragraph, choosing a topic, and making a connected sentences. From the table above, the highest number of difficulties was writing process. For Senior High School learners, it might be difficult for them to start the writing.

For example, Participant 2 showed this during the SRP.

**Figure 5.** An excerpt from participant’s 2 writing difficulties about writing process

In the figure 1, participant 2 stated that he was searching for an idea to start writing. He did not know what to write in the pause 01. When asked, he replied that he was brainstorming the idea to initiate the writing. After looking for the idea, he decided to write about himself. In the next pause (P02) he said that he was thinking about the next sentence that had continuation to the next sentence.

Another example, Participant 1 shows similar data with participant 2’ problem

**Figure 6.** An excerpt from participant’s 1 writing difficulties about writing process

In the excerpt above, participant 1 showed difficulty in deciding the connected sentence (P02). The pause occurred because she was hesitate to select
the next sentence that had connection with the previous sentences. When she was asked, she said that she was thinking about the next sentence that the idea was not jump from the main theme. However, after continued the sentence after pause 02, she deleted the previous sentence. She said that she did not really sure what to write with the deleted sentence, hence she omitted it.

The writing process difficulties that occured might hinder learners to express their ideas. From the four excerpts above, it was noticeable that the participants paused at the beginning of the writing, in the middle of the paragraph, and deleted some sentences that might not suitable in their opinion. They might also seek a save way in order to avoid jumping ideas or message abandonment due to lack of brainstorming ideas.

**Grammar**

During the SRP session, pause and revision during writing process related with grammatical difficulty was also found. Grammatical mistakes that were found are verb forms, articles, and preposition, that mostly occur during the writing process. The researcher only analyzed these three grammar mistakes that was found in the excerpts of the participants.

Figure 7. An excerpt from participant’s 2 writing difficulties about tense marker
Participant 5 deleted be *are* after a long pause (P09) after word *smart*. After the pause, he immediately changed be *are* into *is*. When asked about why he deleted and revised it, he replied that after his second thought he was sure that the appropriate be form in this sentence was *is*. He also stated that be form used was not *was* because the story was narrative.

![Figure 8. An excerpt from participant’s 2 writing difficulties about article](image)

Participant 2 also found grammatical difficulty on article. He added article *a* after a long pause (P06).

Participant 2: I add article *a* because I think I should. I feel it makes sense because I also find the same thing in the reading text at school.

Researcher: Why do you add an article *a* instead of *the*?

Participant 2: I do not know, I think it is suitable.

From the dialogue above, in the process of writing, participant 2 add article that he might only know. During the interview session, he did not know the variation of article in English. He only knew the article *a* and *the* for some words that were familiar for him. He could not distinguish the difference among article *a*, *an*, *the*, therefore he could not explain the use or the function.

**Vocabulary**

Vocabulary was the most frequent difficulty that the learners find during the L2 writing process. Having to deal with the wordings, in which it means the learners must recall their memory on the translation word in L2 from their L1.
Figure 9. An excerpt from participant 5’s writing difficulties about vocabulary difficulty

From the excerpt above, participant 5 deleted word *again* after a pause. When being asked the reason why did participant 5 change the word, he answered that he felt unsure about the words and he wanted to avoid mistakes.

Another similar difficulties that participant experienced during the writing process:

Participant 1 deleted *a book* and changed it by adding *read* after a pause (P09). She continued writing and she paused again (P10). When the researcher asked why she paused a little longer than the previous pause, she found difficulty in describing the book. After continuing her writing in uncertainty that can be seen from P11, she deleted the book and added on my little note because she could not find the appropriate sense of the book she wanted to describe.

Discussion

This study found that there were 3 types of difficulties experienced by the students while composing their writings. They were writing process difficulties,
grammar, and vocabulary. The difficulty that occurred frequently was writing process difficulty since the number of occurrence was in the top among the three difficulties.

This study used a process based approach in investigating the difficulties the learners experienced while composing their paragraphs using computers. Schellens and Waes (2003, p.848) mention in their study that writing in computer successfully raise learners awareness of “word processing comfort”. Learners could change the word without changing the whole text or without considering how the text would stop, yet they could revise immediately during the writing process. From the excerpts, the learners paused, deleted, and changed some words or even sentence several times during the writing process. The process of deleting and revising might not be visible from product base pen and paper process. However from the computer-based writing, it was noticeable that learners faced difficulties during the process of writing.

Writing process difficulty was one of the difficulties found in this study. During the SRP sessions it was observed that the participants were facing difficulties when starting to write a paragraph, continuing to the next sentences in a paragraph, and to develop coherent paragraphs. These are also the problem that learners found during the process of writing. Kellog (1994) found in his study that writing was part of cognitive thinking tools. Planning, collecting ideas, reviewing ideas of text were examples of important aspects of writing skill. However, this study reflected the condition of learners ability in using their writing skills. It might showed that learners received less writing guidance on the cognitive process. For example, when initiating the paragraph, all 5 participants paused at
the beginning of the writing process to decide the topic. In the middle of writing a sentence, it was also found that learners paused to consider next sentence to formulate a coherent paragraph. For learners, deciding topic was also one of the important aspects in writing a text. For example, Participant 1 changed the theme twice because she was unsure about the continuation of the sentences. From her perspective, it might be noticeable that learners were not confident in initiating the writing process.

In addition, grammar difficulties were also found in this study. The grammar elements that learners mostly experienced during the writing processes were verb forms, articles, and preposition. Verb forms difficulty occurred because learners translate their L1 to L2 that might be different form from L2. Pauses during the writing composition occurred because learners corrected the verb form in their sentences. However not all verb forms were revised by the learners. This happened due to the unawareness of the learners during the writing process. They only corrected some words that they were aware of, and ignored the rest that they did not notice. Similar with verb form, article also become difficulty for learners since in their L1 article did not give any huge impact toward the sense of the language, in which it was different from L2 that put article as an important subject to define the sense of a sentence. Hyland (2003) stated that learners were exposed to accuracy of sentence rather than the meaning. By referring to the writing excerpts from the writing process, it was noticeable that learners still found it difficult to determine the use of article in L2. Learners only put article that he or she felt it was suitable or sounds fit with the context. Another difficulty learners found was preposition. In their L1, there was no definite use of preposition for
particular sense, However in L2, various preposition had purpose and meaning that their use for each word might be different. These obstacles might hinder learners in formulating a well-meaningful paragraph of L2 writing because they were lack of knowledge of the use of each grammatical items.

Another difficulty discovered during the writing process was vocabulary. Learners translated words, phrase, or clause from their L1 to L2 which caused pause during the writing process. Flower and Hayes (1981) found that non-expert writers may find difficulty in translating words which may burden their capacity of memorization. The urgency to translate some words or sentences may hinder learners from focusing on jotting down what they have already planned. For example, Participant 5 showed pause and deleted the sentence because of hesitation of the written forms. Some learners also found this difficulty and they changed the word because they felt unsure about the correct words. Non-native English learners might find themselves confused due to the similar phoneme of words such as piece and peace, which made learners often mistaken. Besides, some learners also found difficult to remember how some words were written.

CONCLUSION

Research Summary

This study looked at the difficulties faced by L2 learners while composing their paragraphs. Using SRP, this study focused on the difficulties faced by Senior High School learners in composing a writing in L2 from SMA Negeri 2 Salatiga.
The study analyze the keystroke writing to see the difficulties faced by learners such as writing process, grammar, and vocabulary.

The table above shows 3 difficulties learners faced during the writing in L2. The writing process that includes selection of the theme, ideas, sentence connection, and paragraph coherency affect learners thinking process, which may cause pause during the process of writing. Grammar and vocab also become important cause of learners difficulty in process of writing. Since the form and rules from learners’ L1 to L2 are slightly different, it is possible that learners pause the writing in order to find the appropriate word or revise tense that they are aware of.

**Pedagogical Implication**

This paper was written to reveal the difficulties learners face during formulating a writing in L2. With the curriculum that urges learners to learn merely only superficial depth of language, at the end they only use their L2 knowledge to pass the exam. This kind of curriculum leads to create less proficient learners especially for the needs of learning L2. To maintain this education situation, it is important for agent of education such as teacher, to select appropriate strategy in maximizing L2 learning especially for the focus of to be able to use L2 spoken and written form appropriately. From the analysis, this study suggests that learners’ L1 should accomodate L2 learning. However, it does not mean that to use or incorporate L1 in L2 learning process is always better because the context here is in Indonesia and the use is important to be corresponded with learners needs who are less proficient.
Limitation of the Study

This study, however, is still on the superficial discussion of learners’ difficulties in composing L2 writing. This study only took 5 participants and discuss three difficulties faced by the learners. Hence, to broad the study, it is suggested for further studies to select participants from both learners and non-English language learners. In addition, the discussion on linguistics aspect should be included.
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