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in the 21st Century*



ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND CULTURE
IN COLLABORATION WITH
UDAYANA UNIVERSITY POST GRADUATE STUDY PROGRAM

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STUDENTS DISCOURSE COMPETENCE IN WRITTEN LANGUAGE: HOW PROBLEMATIC?

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Abstract

The paper aims to discuss the problematic discourse elements on students' sentences on their written text and how they influence students' comprehension in writing it. All the data obtained from students' writing were analyzed and discussed based on the determined parameters. The findings show that using discourse components, namely, text design, thematic organization, cohesion and coherence, as well as register appear with the problems in their written language production. As a matter of fact, English education students have the problems with lack of background knowledge and language mastery. Those problems influence very much their comprehension about the topics being written. Due to their lack discourse competence, students could not write the argumentative text well.

Key Words: *discourse competence, text design, thematic organization, register, cohesion and coherence*

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the focus of teaching English as a foreign language is on the use (of students' own real life in a certain functions), the demands to have a good ability cannot be ignored. So, the function and the context of the language is one of the determinant factors that gives significant impact to the quality of language produced. It is clear that any communication involves the function and the textual elements that lead to the interpretation of meaning. It intends to make language users able to produce texts that are understood by receivers. In relation to this, Wodak & Ludwig (1999) claims that language "manifests social processes and interaction" and "constitutes" those processes as well. Because of that, the context in which the language used can be analyzed from several perspectives, such as textual, social and psychological context.

Using the same expression of language in two different contexts may lead to different interpretations. Thus, language functions and context as a part of the essential requirements should be considered. Due to the idea, the main requirements of higher education curriculum 2013 (KKNL-based) is concerned with not only the grammatical competence as a part of communicative competence but also discourse competence for all the skills included, as a higher level of grammatical ability (see Purpura, 2004).

There are many aspects the students should be able to notice while applying discourse competence, that is, thematic organization, cohesive and coherence, logical ordering, style and register, theoretical effectiveness and the co-operative principle.

However, improving students' competence to use appropriate English in the classroom is not an easy work. From the product of students' writing in writing class, it indicates that students ability to use the appropriate language by involving all components of discourse competence has not been achieved yet. It happens on students at English department of undergraduate programs, State University of Padang, especially in written production.

In my previous study, on grammatical interference of English department students in writing (Syarif, 2013), it was found that the determined factors -- syntactical, morphological and lexical elements were problematic, and mostly in syntactical element to the English language use. There are many problems as the causes of interference. One is the intertwined problems in which more cases of linguistic elements found in a single sentence or writing, make the interference more complicated.

From the phenomena pictured out on both empherical data, grammatical interference, and discourse competence of students (shown from their daily writing task) at the English department of undergraduate program State University of Padang are still problematic. There is a need to investigate deeply the problems of their discourse competence.

The focus of discussion is the common facets in discourse elements that contribute to students' failure in acquiring the discourse competence of the language they used. It deals with students' written language concerning their performance in producing text. Thus, the purpose is to find out how problematic the discourse components that contribute to the lack of students' discourse competence on their written language production.

Discourse competence, according to the Council of Europe in *Common European Framework of Reference for Language (2001)*, is categorized into *topic/focus, given/new, natural sequencing, cause/effect*, and ability to structure and manage discourse in terms of thematic organization, coherence and cohesion, logical ordering, style and register, rhetorical effectiveness, the co-operative principle. As it works in the language production, discourse competence is placed in a position where linguistic, sociolinguistic, psychological and other competencies shape it. It takes the specific context and helps the language users produce and understand the sentences or utterances.

Then, in using a language (English), what the user should think is the structure of the utterance, the organization of text, the typical patterns of interactions, as well as the word choice, or anything about the rules of the language. The relationship of the language with the world, such as considering the culture and society should be considered as the characteristics of discourse.

The criteria in which spoken and written language can be considered as a discourse is given by deBeaugrande (1981). He claims that a discourse needs to have cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativeness, situationality, and intertextuality. Discourse competence, then, is in relation to the ability or competence to comprehend, develop and produce the language in forms of text with such appropriate criteria mentioned to combine ideas. The ability covers any spoken or written language used to express idea, thought, or information in order to create communication.

In teaching English as a foreign language, a teacher should consider not only the grammatical competence, but also the discourse competence. In details, McCarty (1991) suggests to facilitate students in learning English not merely with the linguistics elements, but also with developing their knowledge about the use of language in either written and oral text, with the appropriate cohesion, coherence and rhetorical organization to combine ideas. It is then clear that the discourse plays an important role in building a comprehensible meaning of a text.

Written discourse competence, particularly, is related to the competence dealing with how language producers understand and able to create and produce such comprehensible language by considering the cohesion, coherence and many other factors building it. The factors should be suited to the certain types of written discourse. Thus, this competence needs specification in learning and teaching English as a foreign language.

2 METHOD

Discourse analysis design is used, in which the data analysed are authentic and have different version of reality (see Heigham, at al. (2009: 242-247) and Litosseliti at el. (2010: 124-126). This is an analysis is on building a complex, holistic picture of reports on detailed views of informants in a natural setting (see Heigham, at al. (2009: 242-247) and Litosseliti at el. (2010: 124-126). The sources of the data were the production of students' writing, namely the *background of the problem* of their intended paper.

The determined parameters are (1) text design and rhetorical effectiveness, (2) thematic development (organizational), (3) cohesion and coherence, and (4) register re, in which the score of each is 25% for the appropriate use. The score of each writing product was categorized into 5 to know the students' comprehension on the topic written, (UNP norm for the judgment of students success, 2010), namely: very good (81%-100%), good (66%-80%), adequate (56%-65%), poor (41%-55%), and very poor (0%-40%).

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are two cases discussed from the findings of the research. The first is the most problematic aspects of discourse components that contribute to the lack of English students' discourse competence faced in their written language production. It deals with the text design, that is the knowledge of the design convention in the community; and the ability of English students to structure and manage the discourse, consisting of the elements determined in the written text. And the second one is the causes of students' lack discourse competence in written language production. The problems of grammatical competence found in the writing is not under the scope of the paper.

a) Text design of students' writing

In *text design*, there were two problems gained, namely in building the case up; and laying out, signposting and sequencing any ideas on the writing. The fact shows that in the component of building up the case, most of their writings were without *problem(s)* that should be solved. In a sample of writing, as an instance, the writer only focuses on the theoretical aspects on the background of the problem part (*based on the topic written*, that is *the implementation of communicative approach*), and ignoring the real case faced in the field. It has made the writing weak since the case may not be sharply built up. In other words, the paper does not have a strong foundation to expand the background of the problem into a text. The paragraphs did not display the problems that were faced by the teachers or students during the implementation of communicative approach. In fact, the datum may have a good argumentation to be expanded if it is supported by the problems dealing with *traditional approach, not using communicative approach*, such as *the inability of the teachers to use an appropriate technique or materials*.

Each of the problems gives significant impact of the whole text and weakens the importance of the text. Building up the case, especially in expository text, is the main key to develop a good text. Since the students were supposed to write a *background of the*

problem for a paper, *the case* should be the basic step to write the text, in which the layout of the text should follow the general components of the text design. As the cope of their writing, *communicative approach* should be seen as one of the approaches in teaching EFL. The text, then, should contain at least aims and problems in teaching EFL, the general concept of communicative approach as a solution for the problems, and the purpose of the writing, which is to explore the functions of communicative approach for teaching EFL.

Besides, blurred ideas of the paragraph written showed insenquence and did not clearly express thesis statement needed as a signpost. The text was not provided with thesis statement or purpose of the writing. Hence, it does not contain the most important component that gives main points about the content of the whole text. In other words, general clues of the whole text content did not emerge in the text for steering the other elements.

The case may be caused by their lack practices in critical thinking application. Indeed, the interpretation of the argument and evaluation of the text as the indicators of critical thinking are required by good readers in order to write (Paul, 2006; Duncan, 2010). The similar problem also occurred in Syarif's (2012) previous study, picturing out that students did not read much (intensively) for their writing. Their writing of paraphrasing, reviewing and summarizing appeared unsatisfying.

In relation to sequencing, students' writings were mostly found without concluding statement in the last paragraph as the focus of the paper. The way the writer in ending the background is frequently by explaining *what communicative language teaching is*. It is seen in a sample of the datum below:

Datum 3
(last paragraph)

A good approach that can be caused in teaching English is communicative approach. It is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction to the students, so the students are also as a participant in learning English. The students will feel learning English as a fun way to be learn. The students also become active in the class.

The datum above shows that the students did not provide any thesis restatement or purpose of the text. The text was ended by providing writer's opinion related to *advantages of communicative approach for students; how they will feel enjoy in studying*. There is no link between those advantages and the reason why the paper discusses *communicative approach* as the topic in this paper. The writer cannot convince the readers why the text should be categorized important for them without his concluding statement. Similarly, the thesis statement is the most important part in the expository essay since it leads readers to the importance of the text. The data may be probably cured by providing the thesis restatement as follow:

One of the ways to solve the problems above is by applying communicative approach. It is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goals of study.... (Explain it more). Thus, the paper discusses how to implement the communicative approach in teaching and learning process.

As a whole, the arrangement of the sentences in sequence for the coherent stretches of language were not obviously seen in the English students' writing product.

The logical flow of ideas in their writings was seemingly restricted by their background and language knowledge. Based on the whole data, the category of the students' competence in producing text design is in the level of *adequate*. This assumption is corresponding to the approach saying that the intertextuality of language production, or the relation of the outside of the text to the text has very essential role in determining the fluency of the language discourse competence users (see Fairclough 2003). As a matter of fact, English undergraduate students, as the advanced learners, have already finished all writing subjects, and they are supposed to be ready to write final project (either paper or thesis). It means producing well-arranged written discourse (an argumentative text) is the goal.

b) Thematic development (organization) of students' writing

The next discourse seen is the ability of English students to structure and manage the discourse, consisting of the elements determined in the written text. It is discussed with the scope of thematic development (organization). It refers to process of developing the ideas into a systematic and well-arrangement of text.

There were 4 problems on students' expository writing concerning thematic development; (1) they cannot give elaborate descriptions and narratives, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion, (2) cannot develop a clear description or narrative, expanding and supporting his/her main points with relevant supporting detail and examples, (3) cannot reasonably fluently relate a straightforward narrative or description as a linear sequence of points, (4) cannot describe something in a simple list of points. Each of the problems is explained below.

The first problem in thematic development is elaborating ideas, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion. One of the problems that appear on students' writing is lack of ability in elaborating the ideas and related it in a logical description.

The paragraphs do not give detail explanation about the main idea for each paragraph. In one datum, the paragraphs discuss about *process of acquiring language*. However, it does not contain any stages of acquiring the language as the main idea proposed. There is only one sentence that supports the main idea of the former paragraph and 2 sentences in the next paragraph. While, the main idea has a general conception that should be elaborated and described in a more detail explanation. Besides, the paragraphs were not elaborated by sufficient supporting sentences.

The second point is developing a clear description, expanding and supporting the main points with relevant supporting details and examples. Although some students' writings have been provided with such explanation to support their main ideas, some did not show the relevant details or examples. Supporting sentences and examples written were quite away from the main idea. Instead, *the communicative approach* as the main point should have been generated by giving examples and more relevant explanation.

In conclusion of thematic development, most of the writing products were in *poor* category. There were lack of elaboration of ideas, integrating sub-themes, development of particular points, and ending it with conclusion. Since one is linked to other points, each of those problems cannot be separated each other. Those problems influence the efficiency of their writing production. The way of students' thinking in relating one idea to another idea shows their language incompetence. As a matter of fact, this competence is required for developing the theme of the text in discourse written (see Van Dijk, 1997). This case is also seen in Syarif's (2010) investigation on the students writing of discussion of the thesis, in which lack knowledge of linguistic components leads to their broken ideas.

c) Cohesion and coherence of students' writing

Next is related to the cohesiveness and coherence in students' writing. It is analyzed that most of the writing products have the problems on using almost all types of cohesive devices as well as coherence. The problematic use of cohesive devices are on lexical cohesion, substitution, ellipsis, reference and connective as the parameters of cohesiveness of the text written; and the unity of sentences (fitting all elements together logically) as the main characteristics of coherence. The suitability of using cohesion was not really pictured out in their use. The problem of using words which have different meaning or sense (in lexical cohesion) is seen in many sentences. These problems make the idea of the discourse not be caught clearly. In the parameter of cohesion and coherence, students' competence is in the *poor* category

Because the unified ideas could hardly be understood, it indicates that the cases in which the rules of cohesion and coherence have been noted by Doolay and Levinsohn (2000) were not applied. Their statements indicate that the meaningful ties of sentences of a text without linguistic means (coherence) or with linguistic means (cohesive devices) show the linkage of the ideas in the texture of the text. The profile of the written products with the problems of reference may be caused by the lack of competence of the effect of lack of competence on grammar can be regarded as the cause. As Ostler, Emmitt and Pollock (1992:101) claim that *grammar* refers to the basic rule that explains the way the language works, not *determines* the habit of using the language. In addition, it may also be caused by their knowledge on the content on the problem of the problem in expository text that leads them to the use of meaningless text. It is in line with Hammer (2002) opinion that almost every language has different grammar rules; then, the understanding of the users influences their writing product.

d) Register of students' writing

The problem of *register* on students' writings are discussed based on 3 main parameters analyzed. The degree of formality of the language used and the amount of attitude / evaluation expressed by the text-producer are more problematic than the other one. The use of first (*I*) and third (*the writer*) person singular to place the writer as the central position in the text seems to be common, using contraction (such as *won't*) and abbreviation is commonly found in the text. The frequent use of indefinite quantifiers or adverbs is also found in students' writings, such as *some*, *several*, and *many* which indicates uncertainty or doubt. Ideally, the explanation should be more specific by having definite quantification (quantifiers), such as *two*, *four*, and *two*. It is seen that this element is in the very poor category.

For the sake of formality in scientific writing, and to avoid positing himself as the center of ideas, it should have been expressed in passive voice. In the case of datum 10, *SHS* as the abbreviation of *senior high school* impacts the degree of formality of the language used. Albeit they are not very obliged to avoid, the degree of formality in language use has been reduced since the text written is an argumentative one. Corresponding to this, Eggins, in Van Dijk, Ed. (1997) asserts that in register and gender (G&R) analysis, more technical text needs more formality in language use.

Generally, the degree of formality of the language used is related to the choice of words used by the writer; how the writer positions himself on the text written. In a more specific point, the degree of formality of language used is elaborated by 3 main points; thematic position, use of contraction and idioms, level of nominalization, and use of action verb (see Van Dijk, 1997).

4 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study draws deeper insight in discourse competence of students writing of the argumentative text. It is concluded that all parameters of discourse competence predetermined are highly problematic that contribute to the lack of English students' discourse competence on their written language production. Even though it is not very much different, the component of register seems much more problematic for the English education students compared to others. However, in developing discourse components, the students still have low competence.

The problems of students' discourse competence in written language influence their comprehension about the topic being written very much. Not aware of the existence of rules of a discourse makes their writing worse. It is clear that the performance of language used is the reflection of their low competence in mastering the language rules in discourse.

It is suggested that the subjects of discourse and (academic) writings be provided with the instructional plans with more activities related to student's self enrichment of knowledge on the content (ideas) and discourse competence in simultaneous way. Strengthening the cross cultural knowledge in the instruction is needed to be put into account in the subject of *Cross Cultural Understanding*.

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