

The Academic Writing Performance of Novice EFL Student Teachers

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Abstract

Academic writing is an important skill that university students need to develop in order to be successful in their study and career after graduation. This article reports descriptive qualitative information about the performance of academic writing of novice EFL student teachers at an Indonesian private university. Thirteen students at the beginning semesters were involved in the study to constitute the sample. In collecting the data, IELTS writing test along with its assessment analysis and interviews were used. The study revealed that the mean of the students' overall scores in the IELTS writing test is 5.0, which is equivalent to B1 level according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Learners at B1 level are considered as independent users of English or intermediate in using the language. In general, they can produce simple and coherent texts, but only on the topics they are familiar with. The study also unveiled the major issues and challenges faced by the students that include lack of vocabulary and knowledge of grammar in use as well as finding ideas and organizing them in communicative paragraphs. Unfamiliarity about the test is also another issue hindering the students in writing. These findings resonate some related theories and other empirical studies especially on the issues of communicative competence. This article finally suggests a new upcoming paradigm in the teaching of academic writing particularly when preparing students to take the IELTS test for the sake of their education and career success.

Keywords

Academic writing performance, EFL, Novice student teachers, IELTS writing test

Introduction

Writing is one of the skills that individuals need to improve when learning a language particularly English as an international language. Hyland (2013) states that writing can be used to measure the language proficiency of learners. In many education institutions, for example, writing has been utilized as an instrument of examinations. In fact, university students need to be familiar with more advanced writing as they have to create a written scientific report in order to graduate (Kellog & Raulerson, 2007). For students of English department in particular, most of their scientific reports must be written in English regardless of whether it is their first or foreign language. Nevertheless, writing especially in a second or foreign language requires lots of efforts, since it is not only simply putting ideas into words, but the writer has to be able to organize the words in a structured form to convey meaning effectively (Peha, 2002). In this sense, Nunan (2003) states that

“Writing is both a physical and mental act. At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking how to express them, and organizing them in to statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader.” (p. 88)

Writing is then indeed not easy especially for students learning English in an EFL context. However, it should be noted that writing skill is very important and needs to be developed for a broad range of benefits. For instance, in order to be able to pursue an overseas study or to apply for a job at an international company,

an individual needs to take an English test that usually includes writing to show their fluency in using English. Universities particularly in the English speaking countries mostly require their student candidates to take TOEFL or IELTS as part of their admission process (Feast, 2002; Uysal, 2010), and each of the tests has writing section to be completed. In addition to that, these two different tests also have been used as one of the instruments of recruitment process in many companies to get the best employees who are fluent in English (Feast, 2002).

Having realized the importance of writing, the Indonesian government includes writing skill in the curriculum from secondary level to higher education level. As stipulated in the national curriculum, one of the main goals of learning English is not merely on the students' ability in reading various English texts, but the students have to be able to produce a range of written texts that they learn (Kemendikbud, 2016). Therefore, although English is not used as a first or second language in Indonesia, all students are expected to have adequate knowledge and competency in writing English texts upon their study completion. It is then assumed that as the students graduate, their writing skills improve, and they already become familiar with producing different types of texts in English. However, these writing abilities should be developed more in order that the students can write more advanced essays especially when taking English writing test for the purpose of enrolling in higher education or applying for jobs.

As a university lecturer, the researcher is always concerned about his students' English proficiency level especially in academic writing considering the fact that the students he teaches are specifically prepared to be English teachers or professionals in the English language. This research is aimed to reveal the English student teachers' initial level of academic writing skills and investigating the issues they face when dealing with the writing tasks. IELTS writing test was chosen as the main instrument of the research since the researcher believes that this type of test is suitable for students at the beginning years of study. Moreover, many universities in the world consider this test as a relevant component for their admission process, and many scholars are positive about it in spite of their reluctance in terms of its correlation with the skills of academic writing (Moore & Morton, 2007; Feast, 2002; Uysal, 2010).

Literature Review

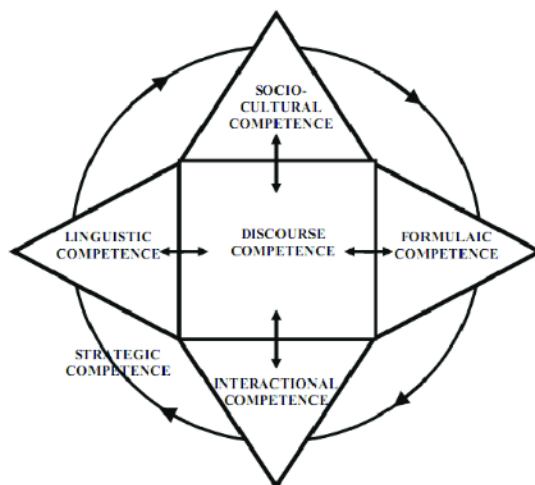
Many scholars and linguists agree that writing is the most challenging part of learning a second language. Kellogg (2001) in his study, for instance, finds that writing is a complex cognitive activity as it tests individual's memory, his/her ability in thinking and verbal command in order to express ideas. He also investigates that the success of writing can be determined by the composition of a text that he/ she has written. Furthermore, Hyland (2003) and Mahboob (2014) assert that good writing is usually reflected on the appropriate use of language with certain degree of accuracy on its structure as well as the potential communication that takes place. In relation to writing to communicate, it is important to understand the concept of "communicative competence" as the final goal of language learning discussed by a broad range of scholars and researchers. This concept was initially introduced by Hymes (1972) who posits that when using a language (particularly in writing), it is not enough to simply understand the rules of grammar and other forms of the language, since an individual needs to be able to apply them communicatively in appropriate contexts as well.

Inspired by Hymes (1972), other scholars develop some models of communicative competence that have been used as reference in many research of language teaching and applied linguistics. Canal and Swain (1980) for example, design the model of communicative competence that includes 1) *grammatical competence*, 2) *discourse competence*, 3) *sociolinguistic competence*, and 4) *strategic competence*. This is also the model used by Hyland (2003) in his book, to describe the qualities of a good writer in second language (L2) context. The latest version of the model was then proposed by Celce-Murcia (2007) in which discourse competence is located at the central area among other communicative competences: sociocultural competence, linguistic competence, formulaic competence, interactional competence and strategic competence. Discourse competence is defined as the ability to select, sequence and arrange "words, structures and utterances to achieve a unified spoken and written text" (Celce-Murcia et al, 1995: 13). The linguistic components contributing to the discourse competence include cohesion, deixis, coherence,

generic structure and conversational structure (ibid, 1995). In both speaking and writing, these components are the major elements that one uses and arranges in conveying meanings or messages to reach the goal of communication.

Figure 1

Schematic representation of 'communicative competence'



Note. Schematic representation of 'communicative competence' in Celce-Murcia (2007)

According to Celce-Murcia's proposed model (2007) as shown on Figure 1 above, when communication happens, all the competences naturally interact with each other to finally shape the discourse competence. In that case, linguistic competence enables an individual to use the basic elements of communication that comprise various lexico-grammatical items, while sociocultural competence allows him/ her to express information appropriately in the context of social and cultural aspects in communication. Formulaic competence deals with the ability of using fixed chunks and prefabricated expressions in daily-life communication, whereas communication occurs as a result of interactions that can be done when one has interactional competence. At last, strategic competence functions in dealing with difficulties when communication problems occur, and this competence works on all the communicative competences. This theoretical framework is applicable since when someone communicates, he/ she actually produces a discourse by utilizing the other competences. In this sense, this model seems to be more relevant than the previous ones in regard to the discussion of writing as a mode of communication in this research. As Agustien (2014) states, "when one reads or writes, s/he is also involved in the creation of discourse although the communicating parties are not involved in face-to-face communication" (p. 2).

From the discussion about the concept of communicative competence above, it can be concluded that writing as a mode of creating discourse tend to be complex and challenging as it requires various competences that an individual needs to develop simultaneously. In other words, although learners have mastered the language structure, vocabulary and all other forms of linguistic components, they may still find it difficult to write for other reasons related to communicative competence. A quite of few research have been carried out to identify particular problems that learners face when dealing with writing activity. Hyland (2003) for instance, discovers several issues encountered by L2 learners in writing, and all of which usually have to do with four certain linguistic aspects such as the appropriate use of the language, grammatical and lexical accuracy and communicative strategies. This notion shows how the inadequacy in some of the communicative competences can lead to problems in L2 writing.

Another challenge of writing is making sure that the text written is communicative, which means that the messages and information conveyed in a text can be easily understood by the readers. To make the text

communicative, again, the concept of communicative competence should work on its place effectively. For example, without adequate linguistic competence, a learner will not be able to use sets of linguistic elements (e.g. cohesion, deixis, coherence and generic structure) to make the text understandable. A text that is not cohesive and coherent can lead to failure in delivering and communicating messages since the readers may find it difficult to understand (Rico, 2014). According to Halliday & Hasan (1976), cohesion refers to the use of reference substitution, conjunction and lexical chains in paragraphs, while coherence is the link that consists of grammatical and semantic relationships among the sentences that build a meaningful text. In more simple definitions, cohesion relates to the connection among sentences in a text, while coherence is defined as the logical correlation between the text and the context or culture that the writer brings with it (Taboada, 2004). In this sense, the quality of writing is not therefore just determined by the ability of arranging words into an accurate-grammatical text, but also by the way how the ideas are logically organized and communicatively expressed in a text.

In different perspectives, Haider (2012) and Hyland (2003) identify the factors causing problems in writing such as psychological and cognitive matters and pedagogical issues. This resonates the findings revealed in several related research. In the study conducted by Rico (2014) for example, reveal other various factors affecting the difficulties in writing such as learners' lack of knowledge and confidence, learners' motivation in using the target language and inappropriate teaching methodologies. Lee (2005) in his research, also finds out that the difficulties of writing arise from both cognitive and affective aspects which play very important roles in the process of learning a second or foreign language. More importantly, other factors such as the learners' literacy and their personal, social and cultural experiences are also evidenced to have an impact on their ability of writing (Cloud, et al., 2009). This is where the sociocultural competence of a learner works. By having some degree of sociocultural competence, a learner will be able to create a text that the readers can easily relate as it contains topics close to their contextual knowledge.

Writing, for its complexity on cognitive and affective aspects, has therefore been a skill tested in the admission process of university enrollment. Many education institutions especially in English speaking countries use either TOEFL or IELTS as an instrument to measure the initial writing skills of their student candidates. IELTS, for example, despite the critics and questions on the relevancy and validity of the test at university level and its correlation with academic writing skills (Moore & Morton, 2007), some studies conclude that the test is reliable, particularly when used in examining the initial competence of learners in using English (Feast, 2002). In relation to the IELTS Academic Writing Task 1, Yu, et al. (2017) for instance, find out that the task requires cognitive processes that are needed to identify L2 learners' initial writing performance before entering a university. In addition to that, Révész, et al. (2017), through their intact study about IELTS Academic Writing Task 2, investigate that this writing test is evidenced to be valid in terms of its correlation with the L2 learners' cognitive writing processes.

In Indonesia, a number of research on the issues of writing especially in higher education context have been carried out. Although many of them focus on different aspects of writing, the findings can be useful to help unveil the typical problems faced by most learners. Faradhibah & Nur (2017) for instance, reveal the problems of writing encountered by university students relating to the use of words and phrases in maintaining cohesion and coherence of the text they are writing. Similar findings in the issues of cohesion and coherence are also shown by different studies (Dewi, 2016; Ismail and Linda, 2018). All these research focus on analyzing exposition texts, which are very close to IELTS writing task 2 in terms of examining the ability of giving argument and opinion. This is the same as what Mickan (2003) and Moore & Morton (2005) point out on their paper that Writing task 2 in the IELTS test is about writing a text of "hortatory exposition". In regard to other aspects of writing, Toba, et.al (2019) in their current study, find that the issues faced by Indonesian university students when writing comparison and contrast essay mostly relate to their lack of knowledge in writing which includes how to get ideas and contents, organize the contents, choose appropriate vocabulary and understand the writing mechanics. They also identify other factors that influence the problems such as students' low motivation and lack of practice.

Despite the above writing issues encountered, based on the national curriculum (Kemendikbud, 2016), it is expected that all university students have the ability to write various texts including academic essays that help them pursue their successful education and career. The expectations about these learning

outcomes is measurable, since in the process of learning and practicing to create a text, students are instructed to follow certain learning stages such as understanding the generic structure of a text, the language features applied, how words and sentences are arranged in paragraphs and how ideas are organized. This is in line with the main requirements of a good written essay as mentioned by different scholars. Boardman and Frydenberg (2008) for example, state that sentences in the paragraphs of an essay have to be written in spatial, logical and chronological order. In addition, Greco, et al. (2006) argue that an essay should be comprised of a topic sentence, supporting details and concluding sentence joint as the generic structure of a written text. In this sense, it is therefore important that the curriculum and its application are always examined and evaluated for achieving the all expected outcomes.

Considering the complexity of writing along with its issues and challenges discussed, this research then attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the initial level of academic writing skill of novice EFL student teachers according to IELTS and CEFR framework?
2. What are the major issues and challenges faced by novice EFL student teachers in English academic writing?

Methodology

The Participants

13 participants were recruited to take part in the research, and all of them are the students of the English Department of Universitas Nasional Karangturi Semarang, Indonesia. This research applied random sampling in which the recruited participants are from two different groups: Seven of them are the students at the third semester, and the rest are the students at the first semester.

The Approach

In this study, descriptive qualitative approach was chosen as it enables a researcher to understand, describe and clarify the thoughts, experiences and activities of a human being (Dornyei, 2007). It can therefore be used by the researcher to investigate the students' initial level of academic writing and to explore the main problems and challenges faced by them in writing. To reach the first goal, the IELTS writing tasks were taken as the instrument of collecting data. In the IELTS writing test, there are two different types of tasks, and the participants did both of them producing 26 essays. To get reliable data, the researcher set out the test under examination condition, which takes 60 minutes for the overall duration (20 minutes for the task 1 and 40 minutes for the task 2) (IELTS, n.d.), despite the fact the it was only held online using Schoology apps in response to the government "Stay-at-home" policy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kemendikbud, 2020). As a follow-up, an online focused-group interview was conducted for the purpose of identifying the potential issues and challenges that the students encountered when writing the essays in the test. In the interview, each group of the students with similar scores were asked the same questions, so that the students can share common things that help a researcher get the best information (Cresswell, 2012).

Data Analysis

Focusing on the research questions, the researcher carried out analysis that follows some stages. First of all, the researcher assessed the essays written by the participants and decided their scores by using the IELTS scoring rubric for the writing section taken from the official IELTS website. According to the rubric, the assessment criteria for writing quality include task achievement/ task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource and grammatical range and accuracy. Each of the criteria is scored ranging from 0 to 9, and the quality of each essay depends on how much score gained in each criterion. The scores and their detailed descriptions of the both tasks were discussed in reference to the proficiency scales by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and other previous relevant studies. As soon as

all the students' works had been assessed, scored and examined, all the interview transcripts were then analyzed to get similar themes to discuss, so that all the common issues and challenges faced in writing could be identified. For this reason, thematic analysis was applied in analyzing the data as it allows a researcher to identify all the emerging themes that are useful in a qualitative research (Kvale, 1996).

Findings and Discussion

Referring to the research questions, the findings are thus presented in relation to two main different topics: 1) Academic writing performance and 2) main problems and challenges faced in academic writing. The findings from these two topics are then discussed with reference to other relevant literature and previous research.

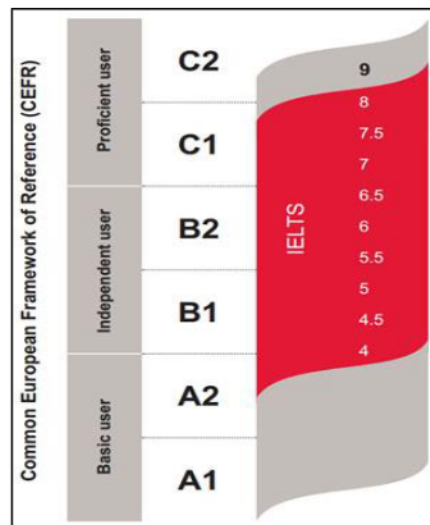
The Profile of Students' Writing Performance

According to the IELTS writing test rubric, the assessment criteria for both of the task 1 and 2 are very similar as follows:

1. Task achievement (Task 1) or Task response (Task 2)
2. Coherence and cohesion
3. Lexical resources
4. Grammatical range and accuracy

The difference is only on the first criterion in which task achievement is used in the task 1, while task response is the criterion in the task 2. All the detailed descriptions of each criteria are provided in the IELTS writing rubric that can be accessed on the IELTS official website. The criteria assessed in the rubric seem to represent the concept of communicative competences in written mode as discussed by different scholars (Hymes, 1973; Canal and Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, et al, 1995; Celce-Murcia, 2007) in such a way that it tests the ability of individual learners in utilizing all the elements of communicative competences that they have to produce discourse in the form of essays (see figure 1). It is therefore important that in preparing the IELTS writing test, learners need to practice to improve all the competences, and teachers can provide tasks that facilitate their students to stimulate each of the competences.

In general, the finding reveals that the mean of the overall score of the students' writing test is 5.0, with 4.679 (rounded up to 5.0) for the Writing Task 1 and 5.192 (rounded down to 5.0) for the Writing Task 2. This overall score is much lower than the mean of the writing scores achieved by test takers worldwide (5.662 rounded up to 6.0) as reported on the official IELTS website in 2019 (IELTS, 2019). Based on the same report, the score revealed in the finding is also lower than the mean score gained by the Indonesian test takers who did the test in 2019 with 5.8 (rounded up to 6.0). Converted to the level of proficiency set out by CEFR, the score of 5.0 in IELTS is similar to B1 level as shown on figure 1 below.

Figure 1*IELTS and CEFR*

Note. Retrieved from <https://www.ielts.org/ielts-for-organisations/common-european-framework>

Learners at B1 level are categorized as independent users of the language learned. CEFR, in more details, describes that for the overall writing skill, learners at this level are;

“able to write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within their field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence” (Council of Europe, 2020).

Specifically in writing report essay as found in the IELTS Writing Task 1 and 2, learners at B1 level are described as follows:

“The learners can write very brief reports to a standard conventionalized format, which pass on routine factual information and state reasons for actions. They can also write short, simple essays on topics of interest. They can summarize, report and give his/her opinion about accumulated factual information on familiar routine and non-routine matters within his field with some confidence” (Council of Europe, 2020).

In relation to writing argument essay, learners at B1 level are able to “briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions” (Council of Europe, 2020). When it comes to the ability of finding strategies in communication, these types of learners are described below:

“The learners can identify unfamiliar words from the context on topics related to his/her field and interests. Can extrapolate the meaning of occasional unknown words from the context and deduce sentence meaning provided the topic discussed is familiar” (ibid, 2020).

Writing Task 1**Table 1:***The detailed and overall scores of the students' IELTS Writing Task 1*

Student	Semester	Detailed score				Overall score
		Task achievement	Coherence & cohesion	Lexical resource	Grammatical range & accuracy	
AG	3	4.0	4.0	4.5	5.5	4.5
ME	3	5.5	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
WI	3	5.0	5.5	5.5	6.0	5.5
YO	3	5.0	5.5	4.5	5.0	5.0
BA	3	4.0	4.5	4.5	5.0	4.5
LE	3	4.0	4.0	4.5	4.5	4.0
ST	1	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.5	5.0
DA	1	4.5	5.5	5.0	5.0	5.0
RE	1	4.0	5.0	4.0	4.5	4.5
AN	1	4.0	4.5	5.5	5.5	5.0
CA	1	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.0
VI	1	3.5	3.0	3.5	3.5	3.5
BU	1	4.0	4.5	4.5	4.0	4.5
Mean		4.5	4.769	4.769	4.923	4.769

The mean of the overall score is 4.769 which is then rounded up to 5.0 with 3.5 as the lowest and 6.0 as the highest. Based on the IELTS scoring rubric, test takers who get 5.0 in Writing Task 1 are described to have some proficiency to use English such as the ability of including relevant details, using adequate vocabulary for the task, organizing the answer (e.g paragraphs, linking words, etc) and attempting to use complex sentences despite the inaccuracies. In relation to each of the assessment aspects, the finding indicates that the lowest score is on the task achievement with 4.5 as the mean score and 3.5 as the lowest one. On the IELTS writing rubric, learners with the score of 4.5 in the task achievement shows that they have attempts to address the given task, but do not cover all the key points of the task. The format used is also not appropriate for the task, probably because of the participants' lack of knowledge and practice about the test. The reason makes sense since all the participants had never done the IELTS test before. As Yu, et.al (2017) investigate in their study, when doing Writing Task 1, test takers need to spend some time to read and comprehend the instructions as well as the given data before starting to write what they have understood. Those who are already familiar with this process would find it easier than those who are not. Researching on the same writing task, Rao, C, et al. (2003) also report that there is a significant improvement on the scores gained after the test takers take an IELTS preparation program. It appears that in order to succeed the test, it is important to understand the format and question types of IELTS and get familiar with them.

The mean score for the aspect of coherence and cohesion is 0.5 higher than the previous aspect with 4.769 (rounded up to 5.0). With this score, the participants are considered to be able to present written information with some organization although there is a lack of progression. However, the cohesive devices used are inadequate with a tendency of repeating words due to the lack of referencing. With this description, the participants' level of proficiency is regarded low as Witte and Faigley (1981) point out that high achievers are more likely to use a range of cohesive devices, synonyms and collocations, while low level learners tend to use a lot of repetitions. Interestingly, in this aspect, one student gained 6.0, which is the highest score, and this is great although there is also one participant who got 3.0, which is the lowest. The highest mean score is on the aspect of grammatical range and accuracy accounting for 4.923 (rounded up

to 5.0). With this score, it is assumed that the participants do not have significant problem in the use of basic structures in writing. Yet, when it comes to using more complex grammar, they tend to make errors that can cause difficulty for the readers to understand their essays.

Writing Task 2

Table 2

The overall and detailed scores of the students' IELTS Writing Task 2

Student	Semester	Detailed score				Overall score
		Task response	Coherence & cohesion	Lexical resource	Grammatical range & accuracy	
AG	3	6.0	5.5	6.0	5.5	6.0
ME	3	5.5	5.5	5.0	5.5	5.5
WI	3	4.5	5.0	5.0	4.5	5.0
YO	3	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.0	5.5
BA	3	4.0	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.0
LE	3	5.0	5.0	5.5	5.5	5.5
ST	1	5.0	4.0	4.5	4.5	4.5
DA	1	5.5	6.0	6.0	5.5	6.0
RE	1	5.0	5.0	5.5	5.5	5.5
AN	1	4.0	5.0	4.0	5.5	4.5
CA	1	4.5	5.0	5.5	5.5	5.0
VI	1	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.5	4.5
BU	1	5.0	4.0	5.0	4.5	5.0
Mean		5.307	5.384	5.192	5.769	5.192

As presented on Table 2, compared to the Writing Task 1, the mean of the overall score for the Writing Task 2 is slightly higher or 0.423 time higher. The overall score is 5.192, which is rounded down to 5.0 with 4.5 as the lowest and 6.0 as the highest for the individual scores. Referring to the IELTS scoring rubric, test takers who get 5.0 in Writing Task 2 are described to have some skills in using English such as the capability of addressing the task and topic given although the structure or format may be inappropriate in places, expressing a position even though its development is not always clear or lack of overall progression, using a limited range of vocabulary although it is adequate for the task and there are errors and limited control of word formation and using a range of basic structures despite the grammatical errors found. Learners with this score are therefore also categorized into B1 level as described earlier. In more specific details, the least mean of the score is on Lexical resource with 5.192 (rounded down to 5.0 followed by Task response at 5.375 (rounded up to 5.5). This means that vocabulary is the aspect that the participants find the most challenging. Most participants got relatively low score in this aspect, maybe because they are not familiar with the test and the given topic yet. This finding seems to reflect the study of Cotton and Wilson (2011) who finds how paragraphing in the IELTS Writing Task 2 is so complicated that it requires adequate understanding on the use of various lexical items especially for cohesion and coherence to make the essay make sense. This study also emphasizes that the test takers who take IELTS preparation class tend to get more advantages in doing the task than those do not.

Similar to the Writing Task 1, the highest performance is on the grammatical range and accuracy with 5.769 (rounded up to 6.0) as the mean of the overall scores. Looking at the scores, both Task response and Lexical

resources seem to be the most challenging aspects in the task, maybe because these aspects require more cognitive processes than others (Révész, et al.,2017; Chan, et al.,2017).

Problems and Challenges Faced

The data about the main problems and challenges faced by the students in doing the writing test is gained through interviews. Most participants mentioned that the challenges in doing both IELTS writing task 1 and 2 have to do with their lack of vocabulary, the use of grammar in context and finding ideas and how to organize them. This finding reflects the results of the study conducted by Toba, et.al (2019) showing that there are 3 (three) common problems faced by Indonesian EFL learners in writing: getting ideas and contents, organizing the contents, choosing appropriate vocabulary and applying writing mechanics (grammar in use). In this sense, Hyland (2003) also points out that the difficulties faced by L2 learners are mainly about the use of the language in terms of grammatical and lexical accuracy and communicative strategies. These are all the issues concerned in the concept of communicative competence discussed by a number scholars (Hymes, 1979; Celce-Murcia et al, 1995; Celce-Murcia, 2007). More importantly, this finding also resonates the notion of communicative competence in the model proposed by Celce-Murcia (2007) in which the students do not only utilize some competences to simply write the essays, but they also need to apply all of the competences to produce communicative texts as a form of discourse.

Lack of Vocabulary

From the interviews, seven out of all thirteen students participating in the test, shared a common issue. They agreed that one of the challenges hampering their writing process is their lack of vocabulary. They said that it was not difficult to get some ideas, but when it comes to putting them in writing, it was difficult because they did not know the English words used to share them. RE, for example, said “The problem is I don’t know a lot of words.” AN also acknowledged his problem by saying, “I think I don’t have enough vocabulary for my writing. I don’t really understand what I write. Sometimes there is a lot of repetitions, and I think my vocabulary is not enough for IELTS writing.” The other five participants shared similar experience and even suggested the importance of learning more vocabulary before taking the IELTS writing test. This resonates some other studies (Haidar, 2012; Afrin, 2016; Fareed, et.al, 2016) which investigate that learners especially in EFL contexts find it difficult to write because of their limited vocabulary to express their ideas. Although all these research do not focus on IELTS writing, the findings can be useful to find out the general difficulties that EFL learners tend to deal with in writing that could be similar to that in the IELTS test.

Knowledge of the Grammar in Use

Seven out of thirteen students explained that the use of grammar in context is one of the biggest challenges in writing their essays. In other words, lack of knowledge and practice in grammar can cause difficulty in writing since this is the key of arranging words and sentences into a text. In fact, errors or inaccurate use of grammar in particular context may also confuse the readers to understand. In the interviews, ME, AG and DE told similar problem on grammar. ME, for instance, mentioned, “For me, I was confused of using grammar. I understand the rules, but when applying them in writing, I don’t know which rules appropriate for the context I was thinking about.” At the same time, AG also shared the same issue: “The most challenging thing for me was using correct grammar. Sometimes, when I was writing, I tended to get confused of how to apply the grammar rules that I have learned.” It appears that even though ME and AG have learned so much and understood all the grammar rules in English, they still found it difficult to use the rules in context when applying them in writing. This writing test seems to be useful for them to reflect on how to learn grammar appropriately through productive activities like writing. In the interview, DA said something different about grammar:

“At the time, I think one of the problems is making good sentences with proper grammar. I think my grammar is really really bad. I can’t mix the past tense, present and the future, and I think most of them maybe don’t make sense.”

DA seems to show how he was not really confident about the essays he wrote on the test. He said that he still lacks of knowledge and practice on how to apply different types of tenses that he has learned. Although he was one the participants who got the highest overall score, he thought that he would still need to improve more as his essays were still far from perfection. Similar findings are also revealed by other research (Connell, 2000; Fareed, et.al, 2016) that one of the major problems in academic writing is the lack of knowledge on grammar and how to use the rules of grammar in appropriate contexts. These studies also conclude that in writing, meanings will not be communicatively conveyed if a text contains many errors and mistakes in grammar. This finding relates to the need of improvement on the students’ linguistic competence that includes mastering lexico-grammatical building blocks to create an accurate and communicative texts (Hymes, 1979; Celce-Murcia et al, 1995; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Agustien, 2014).

Ideas and their organization

In the interviews, five participants mentioned that the most challenging part in writing was getting ideas to write. They said although they had problems in vocabulary and grammar, finding out ideas and organize them into paragraphs was even more difficult. As LE shared, “For me, I had to take time to think about ideas and how to organize them in paragraphs: The ideas seemed to be difficult to arrange.” ME also recounted, “The most difficult thing was finding ideas for the given topic. The process was difficult.” The difficulty in finding and organizing ideas faced by these students also resonates with the similar research conducted by Fareed, et.al (2016) revealing that one of the major factors that hinder learners in writing is limited knowledge of the given topic. This such difficulty is probably caused by the students’ unfamiliarity about the test since they did it for the first time. As Rico (2014) investigates, one of the problems in foreign language writing is the learners’ lack of knowledge and confidence about it. It is also understandable because both IELTS Writing Task 1 and 2 require the test takers to really understand the instructions in order not to fail in giving the answers. For example, In the Task 1, the test takers do not only understand the instructions, but also the data given in graph, table, chart, etc (Yu, et al, 2017), while understanding the format of Task 2 and getting familiar with the common types of topics and questions as well as paragraphing will allow the test takers to complete the task easily (Cotton & Wilson, 2011).

Conclusion

This study is aimed at revealing the initial level of novice EFL student teachers in academic writing and exploring the main problems and challenges they face when writing a text. Through the findings and analysis, the researcher, in reference to IELTS and CEFR descriptions, concludes that the overall students’ performance in academic writing is intermediate. In average, the students’ overall score for the IELTS writing test is 5.0, which is equivalent to B1 level according to CEFR. Specifically in academic writing, learners at this level are considered to be independent users of English in such a way that they are able to produce simple and coherent texts only on the topics they are familiar with or based on their personal interests. They can also describe experiences and events as well as justify their opinions in their field of interests. In relation to writing challenges, this study shows that the major issues the students encountered in academic writing have to do with their lack of vocabulary and knowledge of using grammar in context and organizing the ideas that they get. The students’ unfamiliarity about the writing tasks is also another issue to ponder as it affects their confidence in writing. With these findings, it also appears that there seems to be a correlation between the test scores and the problems faced in writing. All the findings resonate a range of related theories especially the concept of communicative competence and other studies that reveal similar issues in academic writing. This study then suggests follow-up actions relating to the teaching methods and materials that best suit the needs of the students with their identified level as well as facilitate them to develop their communicative competences. It is also suggested that although students have learned

and practice to write different types of text at school and higher education (Kemendikbud, 2016), they still need to be given adequate preparation program before taking the IELTS test, so that they can be familiar about the test and find the strategies that will work best for them.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations on this research. First, the writing assessments using the rubric available for public on the IELTS official website can only be used for prediction, since this process is usually kept confidential by the IELTS organizations (Uysal, 2010). Next, the test conducted online without appropriate supporting tools could allow the participants to cheat and copy any works from the internet or to consult with dictionary for the words they do not know in English. Online interviews can also lead to some particular constraints that hamper the researcher in exploring more aspects of the problems faced by the participants. This article therefore suggests that any researcher conducting a similar study ensure how the test can be organized well under examination condition when being held online. Having revealed the problems and challenges in writing, it might also be useful to investigate the causes of the issues and the strategies used to tackle them, so that any learning and teaching material can be designed based on the students' need analysis.

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