

WRITING GRAMMATICAL SENTENCES: VOICES OF INDONESIAN UNDERGRADUATES IN EFL CLASSROOMS

Yustinus Calvin Gai Mali

Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Salatiga Indonesia

E-mail: calvin.yustinus@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study aims to explore perspectives of Indonesian undergraduates on factors that conceivably help them to write grammatical English sentences. The participants of the study were 40 students in a Procedural Writing class and an Extensive Reading class, at English Language Education Study Program, Dunia University, Indonesia (ED-DU); academic year 2014/2015. The data were collected through students' written responses and interview. More specifically, the students responded to a statement asking their perspectives towards the issue. In the interview process, the researcher asked 3 participants to provide further clarification of the responses they have written. The findings provide some evidence that friends' feedback, sufficient time to practice, and lecturer's feedback are the primary factors perceived by the students. Besides, the overall results of the study would seem to indicate that possessing grammatical competence, specifically in writing the grammatical sentences, needs conscious focus on grammatical aspects through explicit learning of grammar rules and sufficient time to practice the rules, which the study posits as conceivable ways to enhance the students' grammatical accuracy. Eventually, the study proposes possible pedagogical ideas to help the students to minimize their grammatical errors, as an attempt to support their roles as a future professional English teacher and language user.

Keywords: grammar, grammatical sentence, explicit learning, practice

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki pandangan dari mahasiswa calon sarjana di Indonesia tentang faktor yang dapat membantu mereka untuk menulis kalimat bahasa Inggris dengan tata bahasa yang benar. Peserta dalam kajian ini adalah 40 mahasiswa di salah satu kelas *Procedural Writing dan Extensive Reading*, pada Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Dunia Indonesia, tahun akademik 2014/2015. Data penelitian diambil dari respon tertulis mahasiswa dan wawancara. Secara lebih rinci, para mahasiswa merespon suatu pernyataan yang menggali pandangan mereka terkait dengan pokok persoalan tersebut. Dalam proses wawancara, peneliti meminta 3 peserta dalam kajian ini untuk menjelaskan lebih jauh tentang respon tertulis mereka. Hasil analisa data memberikan beberapa fakta bahwa umpan balik teman, waktu yang cukup untuk berlatih, dan umpan balik guru merupakan faktor utama yang disebutkan oleh para mahasiswa. Selain itu, keseluruhan hasil dari kajian ini nampak mengindikasikan bahwa memiliki kompetensi ketatabahasaan, khususnya dalam menulis kalimat dengan tata bahasa yang benar, memerlukan fokus secara sadar pada aspek-aspek tata bahasa melalui pembelajaran eksplisit aturan ketatabahasaan dan waktu yang cukup untuk berlatih aturan tersebut. Pada akhirnya, kajian ini mengusulkan beberapa gagasan pedagogi yang mungkin dapat membantu para mahasiswa dalam mengurangi kesalahan tata bahasa mereka, sebagai suatu usaha untuk menunjang peran mereka sebagai guru bahasa Inggris dan pengguna bahasa yang profesional di masa yang akan datang.

Kata kunci: tata bahasa, kalimat dengan tata bahasa yang benar, pembelajaran secara eksplisit, latihan

INTRODUCTION

Ideas to write this paper derive from my reflective experience (Gebhard, 1999) in teaching Procedural Writing and Extensive Listening classes at English Language Education Study Program, Dunia University Indonesia (ED-DU). Both classes, held in the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015 (January-April 2015), require students to write some written work as parts of classroom assessments. More specifically, the Procedural Writing class requires students to write pieces of writing that show series of procedures, namely directional and process essays, while the Extensive Listening class requires students to write a journal reflection briefly describing the content of audio files they have listened.

I do expect that the students can easily finish the assignments, as they have been familiar with the types of procedural writing, the topic that they frequently discussed when they were in their senior high school. Another reason is that simple-present-tense and simple-past-tense, the common tenses they have learned in their school, are the most frequent tenses they use to finish writing the assignments. Unfortunately, the fact was not in line with my initial expectation particularly after I found some sentences, such as:

- [1] *At the time, we can prepared another vegetables such as spinach.*
- [2] *You following these simple steps.*
- [3] *In other words, we will make food that containing some vitamins.*
- [4] *It is makes our food more delicious.*

Besides these sentences, I found many other related sentences written by a number of students in both classes, which lead me to think reflectively how I can help the students to enhance their grammatical accuracy considering their roles as ED-DU students who are prepared to become a professional English teacher and language user whose accuracy is highly required (Mali, 2011). Therefore, the students clearly have to minimize, try to avoid those similar errors, and to develop their grammatical

accuracy in writing English sentences. Otherwise, they will not be able to teach and to guide their future students to do so.

When it comes to the discussions of grammar, one controversial issue has been about its essence specifically in English language learning and teaching. The 1980s seemed to indicate an anti-grammar movement primarily influenced by Krashen's (1982, as cited in Hedge, 2000) view that students can acquire grammar in natural ways through meaningful input and interaction opportunities in their classroom. In a sense, this is reinforced by communicative language teaching paradigm favoring that "the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.71). However, some maintain vital roles of grammar in the study of English language and for the students' foreign language learning. For instance, a group of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Bangladeshi university views grammar as an essential component of language learning (Azad, 2013). Similarly, as revealed in Male's (2011) study, fifty-four students in a university in Indonesia admitted that grammar takes an essential role in their study of English. Also, to master a language, grammar is an important aspect to learn and one should use grammatically correct pattern to construct a meaningful sentence (Ana & Ratminingsih, 2012).

Reaffirming the importance of grammar in language learning, a plethora of international studies has been carried out to deal with grammar, such as EFL teachers' belief in grammar teaching practices (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Azad, 2013, Uysal & Bardakci, 2014) and EFL students' view on grammar teaching (Male, 2011).

Farrell and Lim (2005) conducted a case study to investigate and compare two experienced English language teachers' beliefs and practices of grammar teaching. The study revealed that teachers positively responded a traditional deductive approach involving such activities as doing direct

teaching, explaining grammatical rules, providing students with grammar drilling, and correcting errors.

Focusing on fifty-four Indonesian university students' views on the teaching of English grammar, Male's (2011) study provides some evidence that the students preferred explicit grammar teaching. Besides, the majority of the students regarded doing practical exercises, contrastive analysis, syntactic parsing, and studying grammar rules as most significant learning activities that help them understand English grammar.

Another study is by Azad (2013) who explored attitudes towards grammar and its teaching and learning possessed by thirty EFL teachers in Bangladeshi universities. The data analysis showed that the teachers preferred explicit grammar instruction and contextualized use of grammar in communicative activities and highlighted the essence of error corrections. Besides, they believed that formal grammar instruction possesses a facilitative role in language learning.

In a more recent year, Uysal and Bardakci (2014) investigated one hundred and eight Turkish primary-level English language teachers' belief and classroom practices concerning with grammar teaching. A questionnaire and a focus group interview were used to collect the data. The study would seem to indicate that a large majority of teachers support the beliefs on representing grammar teaching with such traditional approaches as using explicit grammar teaching followed by controlled practice, using the first language (L1), doing mechanical drills and repetitions. Besides, teachers' common classroom practices mostly deal with teaching, practicing, and testing of grammar. Importantly, the study also appears to prove that communicative activities were regarded essential only after the traditional practices. Besides, the study indicates that most of the teachers prefer the traditional focus-on-forms approach in teaching grammar, which provides an understanding of the grammar by a variety of means and exercises entailing using the

grammar in both non-communicative and communicative activities for both comprehension and production" (Sheen, 2002, p.304).

In harmony with Farrell and Lim's (2005); Azad's (2013); Uysal and Bardakci's (2014); Male's (2014) argumentation on explicit grammar teaching, Hedge (2000) states that:

there is a degree of agreement among researchers, based on extensive studies that a focus on grammar and the explicit learning of rules can facilitate and speed up the grammar acquisition process (p.151).

To sum up, the following may be said dealing with the related studies and literature on the grammar issues. First, the studies provide some evidence that the teachers involved in the studies favored the traditional approaches to teaching grammar, such as explaining grammatical rules explicitly, doing grammar drilling, and correcting errors. Second, the studies were in EFL contexts and mostly aimed to explore the teachers' (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Azad, 2013, Uysal & Bardakci, 2014) and students' (Male, 2011) perspectives towards grammar teaching practices. In essence, this would seem to suggest that little research has been carried out to explore students' perspectives on factors that help them write grammatical English sentence. A study to suggest possible ideas on grammar teaching, grounded from the articulated perspectives, to minimize the grammatical errors and to enhance the students' grammatical accuracy seems to be limited in number. The scarcity encourages this study to explore perspectives of EFL Indonesian undergraduates on factors that conceivably help them to write grammatical sentences. It is also to suggest possible pedagogical ideas to help them to minimize their grammatical problems and to enhance their grammatical accuracy.

To avoid misinterpretation, the term grammar in this study covers these three essential ideas as adapted from Lock (1996); Harmer (2007). It is related to syntax, a

system of rules explaining how words are combined to form a meaningful sentence. Therefore, students cannot write *they arrive will at eight o'clock around* as in affirmative sentences, the auxiliary verb, will have to be placed before main verbs. Then, grammar also concerns with how words are formed and how we can change their forms to express various meanings. For instance, we can add *-d* to the verb *arrive*, so we can make it *arrived* expressing something done in the past. Eventually, Harmer (2007, p.32) adds that:

Grammar can thus be partly seen as knowledge of what words can go where and what form these words should take. Studying grammar means knowing how different grammatical elements can be strung together to make chain of words.

On the one hand, I clearly understand that writing grammatical sentences will always become a challenging issue especially for students in Indonesia, where English is considered as a foreign language (Mali, 2015) showing a situation in which people learn English in a formal classroom with limited opportunities to use the language outside their classroom (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). On the other hand, this current study hopes to propose pedagogical ideas, reflecting on the articulated students' perspectives, on which EFL teachers, particularly in Indonesia could reflect and find conceivable ways to help their students to deal with the grammar issues. Besides, the articulated perspectives are expected to provide insights whether the use of traditional approaches to teaching grammar (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Azad, 2013, Uysal & Bardakci, 2014) is still applicable particularly in the context of Indonesian higher education. Eventually, the findings were expected to help EFL students, particularly in Indonesia to minimize their grammatical problems, and help them to enhance their grammatical accuracy, as an attempt to support their roles as a future professional English teacher and language user.

METHODS

The present study sought to explore perspectives of Indonesian undergraduates on factors that conceivably help them to write grammatical sentences. To achieve the objectives, the study obviously needed to delve detailed personal responses from research participants that indicated my limited control over the exploration (Malilang, 2013). Therefore, I employed a qualitative approach that helps to understand social phenomena as perceived by human participants who were involved in the study (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). In particular, I approached the study using the content analysis (Neuman, 2006) paradigm.

Participants

The study involved forty ED-DU students in a Procedural Writing class (class C) and an Extensive Listening class (class E) held in the second semester, academic year 2014/2015. They were all the second semester students who took Basic Grammar class in the previous semester. At the time when the study was conducted, all of them were taking Intermediate Grammar and Procedural Writing classes. In that case, it seemed possible that they had been taught and got their experience in writing grammatical sentences. Therefore, it was supposed that they were able to reflect on factors that helped them to do so.

Materials

Initially, I asked the students to provide written responses towards a statement asking them to explain factors that possibly help them to write grammatical English sentences. I translated the statement into their first language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, (L1) and allowed them to provide written responses to the statement using the same language, for I aimed to ensure that they understood the statement completely and responded it deeply.

In addition to the questionnaire, I conducted a semi-structured interview, in

which an interviewer may ask a series of structured questions to his interviewees and explore more deeply with open-form questions in order to obtain further information from them (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The interview aimed to ask students to provide further clarification concerning their written responses to the statement so that I could obtain richer responses from the participants. In essence, the interviewees were three students (two students were from the writing class, and the other was from the listening class) who, based on my observation, made most minor grammatical problems in their written assignments. For the same reason, I conducted the interview in their L1. To keep the confidentiality, the names of all participants in this study were kept in codes.

Data collection

To collect the data, I asked the students to respond the statement on Friday, 10th April 2015, while those in the listening class did it on Monday, 13th April 2015. Then, I proceeded to the interview section on Friday 17th April 2015. In the interview, I showed the interviewee's written responses and guided him/her with questions to clarify the responses further. The information from the interview was recorded using a voice recorder, transcribed, and analyzed to support the data obtained from the written responses.

Data analysis

All the written responses and the interview data were analyzed using a content analysis, a technique to examine information containing in written documents (Neuman, 2006). Moreover, it particularly "takes texts and analyses, reduces, and interrogates them into summary form through the use of both pre-existing categories and emergent themes to generate or test a theory" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p.476). In this study, I interpreted the written responses and the transcribed interview data by underlining particular ideas that became possible factors helping the students to write

grammatical sentences. Eventually, the analyzed ideas from the written responses were generated into categories and supported by interview data to answer the research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore perspectives of Indonesian undergraduates in EFL context on factors that conceivably help them to write grammatical sentences. To achieve the objective, I present the research results obtained from the questionnaire data that specifically show some generated categories related to the factors. To provide the trustworthy discussions, I support the research results from the questionnaire data with excerpts of students' responses in the interview. For the purpose of the study, I translated all the excerpts into English.

Factors helping the students to write grammatical sentences

As the results of the analysis, the present study reveals fifty-two cited responses about the factors that help the students to write grammatical sentences. More specifically, the responses are categorized into eleven main categories, namely friends' feedback, sufficient time to practice, lecturer's feedback, studying in grammar classes, reading grammar books, and learning from friends. Other categories include classroom grammar review, watching English movies, self-checking, learning from mistakes, listening to English songs. Table 1 depicts the categories.

Table 1. The analyzed factors that help the students to write grammatical sentences

No	The factors (translated by the researcher)	Number	Percentage
1	Friends' feedback	11	21,15 %
2	Sufficient time to learn	10	19,23 %
3	Lecturer's feedback	9	17,30 %
4	Studying in grammar classes	6	11,53 %
5	Reading grammar books	4	7,67 %

6	Learning from friends	3	5,77 %
7	Classroom grammar review	3	5,77 %
8	Watching English movies	2	3,85 %
9	Self-checking	2	3,85 %
10	Learning from mistakes	1	1,94 %
11	Listening to English songs	1	1,94 %
TOTAL NUMBER		52	100 %

I continue this section by discussing three primary factors that help the students to write grammatical sentences, namely friends' feedback, sufficient time to practice, and lecturer's feedback.

Friends' feedback

As displayed in Table 1, friends' feedback is the most frequent category cited by the students. In that case, the majority of the students admit that their friends help them to check their sentences and to show any grammatical errors in the sentences as what some students convey in their responses "My friend always helps me. I show my written work and often ask her whether my sentences are grammatical (S8/WR/CFD); I ask my friends' help to check my sentences and show me any grammatical errors they find in my sentences" (S11/WR/CFD). Another response includes "my friends usually read my sentences and correct any errors I made before I submit my essay to the lecturer" (S27/WR/CFD).

Sufficient time to learn

This category would seem to indicate that most of the students had experienced their long process of learning grammar and learned grammatical aspects before they studied at ED-SWCU. The category covers such written responses as "I have learnt grammar for 10 years, so it is obvious that I can write grammatical sentences (S2/WR/SFL); I have learnt English grammar since I was in the fifth grade of elementary school, so I have learnt a lot from my teachers" (S38/WR/SFL). This is in line with what the interviewees convey in the interview:

It is true that we need a long time to use grammar correctly. I do not find any difficulties to use simple present tense. It was not easy when I learnt perfect tenses. When I was in my senior high school, it was difficult for me to use them. Luckily, I got my private course in my school, so I, since then, have become accustomed to use the tenses (S16/IW/SFL).

I joined an English course when I was in my third grade of elementary school. I took four levels that lasted for one and half years. In one of the levels, I got a lesson on present tenses, so I started to understand them. In fact, the tenses were taught in my school. As I had learnt them outside the class, I could apply them before my teacher taught me in the class (S3/IW/SFL).

Lecturer's feedback

Another prominent category was lecturer's feedback. The findings would seem to indicate that a lecturer's feedback takes an essential role in helping the students to write grammatical sentences. Most of the students respond positively that the feedback discusses grammar aspects in their written work. This category includes statements, such as "my lecturer corrects some of my sentences and tells me how to improve them (S4/WR/LFD); I consider all corrections given to my written work" (S36/WR/LFD). Further, in harmony with the written responses, two interviewees clarify how their lecturer's feedback helps them to enhance their grammatical accuracy:

In Procedural Writing class, my lecturer provides feedback for an essay that I have written. The feedback covers whether grammar in sentences that I use in the essay is correctly applied. If it still needs to be improved, the lecturer gives constructive suggestions how to do so, such as asking me to change particular words and patterns (S14/IW/LFD).

My lecturer is very kind and cares us. Dealing with the grammar, he always reminds us whenever we make

grammatical mistakes and circles the mistakes. He does it every week. Then, I still remember when he asked me to come in front of the class, sit beside him, and show my essay. Afterwards, he read it, circled any sentences that need to be improved, and explained why he did so. He told me to change some sentences. Therefore, I try to improve my grammar, so he does not call my name continuously and mention the grammar mistakes I make (S16/IW/TFD).

This study attempts to explore perspectives of Indonesian undergraduates on factors that conceivably help them to write grammatical sentences. Importantly, friends' feedback, sufficient time to practice, and lecturer's feedback are the primary factors mentioned by the students. The present study highlights the essence of lecturer's feedback showing any grammatical aspects to be improved in students' written work. Hendrickson (1981) believes that learners can learn from their mistakes if they are given supportive feedback from their teachers. It is also well noticed that the students had a chance to show their work and to consult the grammar to their friends who were willing to discuss the grammatical errors in the written work. This finding may be a demonstration of correcting errors (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Azad, 2013) in grammar teaching. In a sense, showing what to improve in the written work suggests that students possibly experience explicit grammar teaching (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Azad, 2013; Uysal & Bardakci, 2014) from their lecturer and friends. In that case, Hedge (2000) clearly emphasizes that the grammar acquisition process can be facilitated and speeded up by focusing on grammar and doing the explicit learning of rules.

Furthermore, it is also obvious that the students had started to learn and practice grammar when they were in their senior high school, even in their elementary school. Nevertheless, the key is not on the English course or the private course they joined. It is more on the input, "language

sources to initiate the language learning process, such as, teacher-initiated classroom discourse" (Richards, 2002, p.157) and "the samples of language to which learners are exposed and from which they are expected to learn the ways of meaning of the target language" (Lock, 1996, p.270) they have obtained particularly on grammar prior to their study at ED-DU. It is also clarified in the interview that some students have started to learn some tenses from their teacher. Therefore, it seems likely that they have been well equipped with perhaps foundations of grammar knowledge and ready to write grammatical English sentences in every class at ED-DU.

CONCLUSION

In light of the findings, the study proposes some possible grammar teaching practice based on the grammar teaching concepts (adapted from Brumfit, 1979; Ellis, 1994; Skehan, 1996b, as cited in Richards, 2002, p.154; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Azad, 2013; Uysal & Bardakci, 2014; Lock, 1996) that English teachers specifically in the context Indonesian higher education may use to deal with the grammar issues. The first practice covers the concept of grammar-focused activities, such as "reflecting typical classroom use of language, focusing on the formation of correct examples of language, and practicing small samples of language (Brumfit; Ellis; Skehan, as cited in Richards, p.154). The second practice reflects ideas that the traditional approaches, such as correcting errors, explicit grammar teaching, repetition, and drilling, (Farrell & Lim; Azad; Uysal & Bardakci) and focus on forms approach (Sheen) in teaching grammar are likely applicable. The last one is related to the concept of practice as methodological options in grammar teaching (Lock) that involves interaction among a teacher and students and among students themselves. Lock further clarifies that the practice involves "the learners' use of specific grammatical features in production and a great deal of repetition of

the grammatical feature combined with feedback on performance” (p.273).

Considering the concepts mentioned above, the teachers still need to review particular grammatical theories and remind the students about their grammar accuracy in the classroom. Besides, providing feedback to grammatical aspects of students’ written work is necessary. In that case, the teachers can always encourage their students to do their peer-review activity asking their friends to check their written work before they submit it to their teacher. It is also essential that the teacher have a classroom discussion on some grammatical errors in particular sentences made by some students, ask all students in the classroom to identify the errors, to explain them, and correct them. The results of the study will also support the existence of any classes in which students can obtain a sufficient number of grammar input, practice, and drill. Eventually, the overall results of the study may be a demonstration that to possess a grammatical competence, specifically in writing grammatical sentences, needs conscious focus on grammatical aspects through explicit learning of grammar rules and sufficient time to practice the rules, which the study posits as conceivable ways to enhance the students’ grammatical accuracy.

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