

TEACHING WRITING TO EFL STUDENTS: AN ADULT TEACHING REFLECTION

Murwani Ujihanti

English Department, Sriwijaya State Polytechnic
anjaniufl@yahoo.co.id

Abstract: Teaching writing to low English competence of EFL adult students is challenging. Teachers have big job in training low English competence to meet the high demand writing skills at the job market. This article discusses of the effort to propel the capability of writing in order to be able to meet the requirement of the job market. First, it describes what ideally writing skills mastered by students. Then, teaching condition and situation are presented to provide overall picture of the EFL situation where the object of the discussion takes place. Finally, suggested solution proposed that is open for further discussion.

Key words: *EFL teaching, teaching writing, writing, teaching EFL adult*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is the productive activities of a writer that needs training for doing so. The underlying reason for the obstacle is a word or words do not exist by nature instead of produced by human society. As an outcome of the intensity of ideas, thoughts derived from extensive readings or acquiring enormous information that blend with previous understanding then through a process of transformation to eventually form new understanding of a certain issue. This new understanding needs an outlet for self-expression that is in the form words. Neat and well-structured words in communicating people ideas in the form written words are what we mean by writing.

Writing means transmission of knowledge mastered by the writer. As a product of human knowledge, writing is a process of understanding expression in a certain field of knowledge that done in transforming to become a person who performs critical thinking socially as a member of society. Start with formulaic paradigms as a foundation of writing convention polished with the freedom of expressing problem solving of the social issues writing develops into a media of self-actualization.

Teachers experience the conceptual paradigms for writing. This view develops from formalistic paradigm becomes cognitive and eventually transform to social/critical paradigm. These three paradigm developments give underlying concept of teaching writing. Starts from building the basic construction of writing regulation, then gradually lead students to express their ideas or exploration of thought concerning of certain issue, finally writing is expected as a need to self-actualization within their social community. In this stage, writing has shifted to the media of communication within organizations, certain field of knowledge, or even work places.

Despite the compulsory training in gaining the writing skills, writing is also a habit that so much influenced by the local culture. The more writing practice we have the smarter we are in writing. This idea due to writing is not imbedded capability of human being. It needs practice to sharpen this ability. It is like a knife that needs regular sharpening. In this situation, the local culture where we live has great influence to the form of writing habit. The culture where story telling or oral communication more dominant causes limited writing records. People do oral communication in their live makes writing a bit hindered. This phenomenon will surely be the obstacle in employing writing task in the classrooms.

The shift to writing culture from verbal one is still insignificant even though internet has dominated the society live style. Some arguments concerning with this case is various. From the influence of mother tongue logical pattern to the low eagerness to read, triggers the fact of low writing capability. The most evoking view in term of low writing skill is the urgent improvement in reading habit. On the other hand, Felicia Uterodewo (Jakarta Post, April 27, 2011) conveyed that "Indonesians' lack of ability with the Indonesia language". It means that not all Indonesians are able to use Indonesian language well. They still blend oral language within written language when they are writing. Therefore, their writing works are ineffective.

The other destructor is low reading habit. This dispute occurs because writing is productive activity of language use. Logically, to enable students to write there should be enough knowledge repertoire concerning with the writing topic. Reading is a passive activity when students acquire new understanding after combining new information from the reading and their schemata. This new understanding, knowledge, is the one that will be set out in the form of writing. In short, reading habit is in line with writing ability, the higher reading activities the more skillful in writing.

Writing ability of the students still need to increase since "... the quality of so many of the graduates was so poor, IITF has taken to giving the small share of the most promising applicants..." (Atkinson, 2010, page 1). He even gives further evidence over this idea by saying that is *Sstrikingly*, among recent graduates of four-year colleges, just 34, 38 and 40 percent were proficient in prose, document, and quantitative literacy, respectively. " These facts show that higher education release lot of graduates who have not yet learned the importance of language in effective communication including written communication.

Mostly education was regarded, especially polytechnic, as a means of getting high grade that enable students to enter university. Then university gain the right degree to make students occupy the well paid secure job. Nowadays challenge requires more to adaptable skills to cope with a changing marketplace. Unfortunately, universities have no chance to conduct remedial teaching for undergraduates who did not master basic skills in thought analysis, spelling, punctuation etc. Therefore, polytechnic is supposed to meet the challenge in equipping the students with basic skills to face competitive marketplace environment

To sum up, job market demand of written communication skills is high meanwhile the students' skills in communication still needs to improve. Therefore, teachers should take the challenge of teaching English into account, especially written communication. Teachers of English strive to increase student communication skills to meet the demand of the job market.

To sum up what has been discussed in the background that job market needs high written communication skills such as writing letters to potential clients, writing formal reports (approximately 1500 – 2000 words), summarizing meetings, job application letters. (TOEIC – Can-Do Levels Table). On the other hand, students of Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya are able to write: short notes, directions and lists with difficulty and not fill out forms, detailing memos, letters or reports. (The result of TOEIC test 2011) Considering the gap of writing ability of the students, the challenge faced by the teachers of English in Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya is in the domain of increasing language and higher cognition problems.

The purpose of this article is describing problem in learning writing in Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya, then followed by presenting the suggested solutions. The study is a self evaluation of teaching result that was based on the result of English proficiency test which was conducted at the end of schooling program every year and the summarized problems encountered in the field during teaching times. The ultimate purpose of this article is offering ideas to improve students' language skills mainly in writing. Therefore, the discussion focuses on describing the problem formulation which concerns on problem of language and higher-order of cognition.

DISCUSSION

The format of the discussion consists of two sections, they are problem description and suggested solution. Problem description explains the sum up problems found during the teaching practise in the class rooms. Suggested solution conveys the ideas that might be useful for overcoming the obstacles of increasing English writing capability.

Problem

Polytechnic is a tertiary level school. Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya is in Palembang, capital city of South Sumatera. Polytechnic has 13 departments with the total number of students are 4050 students. The class in Polytechnic Negeri Sriwijaya is mix between boys and girls. There are twenty-four students at the most in each class. The students are between seventeen to twenty one years old with various English capabilities.

Their learning styles are visual 46% and auditory 54% (survey based on Learning Style Inventory by Kolb, 2005). It gives us explanation that visual and auditory learning styles dominate students of Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya.

They come from various regions of South Sumatera province where English is their foreign language. Their mother tongues are different according to the places they come from as South Sumatera has many local languages, but they speak Indonesian as their national language. It means English is their third language where limited exposure and resources about English. Class size in Polytechnic is 24 students per class. Students learn 35 hours a week during 6 days. They take 10 to 14 subjects per semester, during 20 weeks.

Teaching objectives of English is learning language as communication in business area. Some people might think of business communication is concerning language used in a very strict and formal situation. They actually are true but let me explains that business communication occurs in both formal and informal situation. Formal situation is likely used in business presentation, business meeting, writing report, negotiation and so forth. Meanwhile, in doing business people need to maintain relationship with clients, colleagues, entertaining visitors, take guests tour around the business venues, and many other things when they use informal language during interaction. In this case, the objective of teaching English writing in Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya seems more to business English. Especially for writing is more writing as communication tool rather than academic writing.

Writing is a productive language skill. It means by writing, teachers train students to express their idea in a concise and easily followed logically. After reading or having enough input of knowledge students are supposed to be able to express their opinion in the form of writing.

In this condition, to cater for the objectives of teaching writing in English teachers need collaboration or communication with teachers of other subjects. This link will make the work easier in dedicating good service to the students (clients). There will be a match between topics and contents of English syllabus and students' field of study as well. Consequently, students will get friendly topics in English writing and it will end up to more interesting writing work. The reason is students have enough background knowledge about the writing material.

In this institution, English position among other subjects considers as something segregated. Teachers of English have limited time to interact with other teachers from other subjects. Partly teachers of English are not the teachers of the department, where they work, so there is a feeling of being guests. They are from English department sent to teach all departments in this institution. There is a kind of feeling temporary visitor or guest to works not permanently. Possibly, next semester teachers of English will teach other departments. It

means they work in new environment and should adjust the new circumstances of their new work place.

Student's English competence of Polytechnic Negeri Sriwijaya in average is elementary level (348 TOEIC international test 2011). This test conducted for the students who were in 6th semester, before graduation TOEIC International Test measured students English competence. The scores were compiled from all the classes in Polytechnic Negeri Sriwijaya about 1272 data/ students (11 department, 53 classes)

The elementary level capability (348 TOEIC International test) referring to TOEIC can-do levels table means students are able to *write short notes, directions and lists with difficulty and not fill out forms, write details memos, letters or reports*. This fact gives us description that students' English competence desperately needs to propel. The requirement of the job market is at the level of 605 – 780 for Basic Working Proficiency and 785 – 900 for Advanced Working Proficiency. In short, it needs two or three leaps to fulfill the job market requirement.

Language problems that need to take into account are poor vocabulary, awkward phrasing and unconventional grammar, difficulty with sentence structure and word order, trouble reading back what is written. These are the result of long observation during teaching times. Students have limited capability to express themselves in English since they lack of vocabulary to describe their ideas. Also, their mother tongues influence strongly toward the grammar of English that creates untidy sentence structure and word order.

Students also have psycho-linguistic problems in writing, they are: trouble generating ideas or elaborating on them, difficulty developing and organizing ideas, lack of opinion or sense of audience, and difficulty with writing tasks that require creativity and/or critical thinking.

Learning time for English is various from department to department. The effective teaching time during a semester is 16 weeks. The duration of teaching times a week varies from 100, 150, and 200 minutes per week. Therefore, in one semester, time allocation for teaching English varies from 1600 minutes/ 27 hours to 3200 minutes/ 53 hours. It means time for teaching writing is less that the time allocation since writing skills is inserted in the English teaching time.

Limited teaching aid is also another factor that should be considered. The limitation is mainly in the insufficiency of language laboratory. Further, some of the classes have unwell operated LCD. Audio and video teaching aids still need to increase. In EFL situation sound, pictures, and even motion pictures will contribute significantly to the teaching and learning process. Teaching aid is crucial since it enhances teaching capability to overcome limited exposure to English.

Books and any resources that can enrich teaching capabilities is limited. Books, journals, magazines and any other up-to-date references are crucial requirement for accelerating teaching productivity. Getting information of EFL/ESL pedagogy is one of the efforts to keep teachers catch up of what is happening in the teaching field. It fosters teachers to do self development that will end up to institutional high grade level.

Teaching English in Polytechnic Negeri Sriwijaya is undetachable from other subjects within department. Intradepartmental communication is beneficial due to writing program can be imbedded in all the subjects in Polytechnic Negeri Sriwijaya. If frequent writing assignment is part of teaching program for all subject, students will get benefit of more extensive practice in writing skills. Better writing skill in Indonesia will improve writing skill in English.

s of their new

an average is
or the students
sured students
technic Negeri

ing to TOEIC
and lists with
s fact gives us
the requirement
and 785 – 900
fulfill the job

lary, awkward
nd word order,
during teaching
ce they lack of
ngly toward the

uble generating
k of opinion or
and/or critical

it. The effective
s a week varies
e allocation for
hours. It means
is inserted in the

The limitation is
sses have unwell
s situation sound,
ing and learning
vercome limited

limited. Books,
requirement for
ogy is one of the
It fosters teachers

om other subjects
writing program
f frequent writing
t benefit of more
prove writing skill

Suggested Solution

In this space, the proposed way out will be presented. The suggestion is based on the problem described previously in the discussion that concerns with teaching adults with low level English competence students who employ visual and auditory learning styles. Teaching adults is tricky. Teachers have to make sure the students understand why they learn the subject or topic at school. Students have to know that the subject taught is an important part of learning.

Further more, student learning style should be addressed. Visual and auditory learning style are dominant styles of the students at Polytechnic Negeri Sriwijaya (survey based on Kolb and Kolb, 2005, Learning Style Questionnaire).

Visual learners can learn effectively when we use visual teaching aids. Picture, graphs, diagrams, and illustration help them to internalize the concept. So, clear and good quality of picture and visual equipments are crucial to cater for this learning style. During the teaching process, the visual learners need handouts and also screen or white board to clarify the concept. Anything that presented visually is of benefit for them.

The other dominant learning style is auditory learning style. This type of learners are good at listening all sounds associated with the learning. Therefore, teacher needs to be well articulated in explaining and describing concept. These type of students, usually, actively participate in discussion. To cater for this type of learners, teacher needs to explain the concept by speaking clearly, asking questions, and getting students to ask questions.

As a wrap up of teaching strategy to cater for these two dominant learning styles at Polytechnic Negeri Sriwijaya, teachers are supposed to apply eclectic strategy. Partly, make use of any visual teaching aids to convey the concept, and the other is employing audio teaching aids. Due to the rare, not all department provide this teaching aid, audio equipment for learning English teacher needs to make sure this teaching aid is available during teaching time. The way how to get this teaching aid might arrange and make coordination with the department that has this equipment.

Effective learning for adults is having practice experience. Let the students to be active during the learning process. After explanation or description done by the teacher, the next step is conducting small group discussion, role playing, or even doing project. Such activities keep students energized that is beneficial to get more understanding about the topic or concept they learnt. "... the complexity of memory formation, minor disruptions in one or more of the involved signaling cascades, including ROS-reactive oxygen species, can be deleterious to memory formation.... ROS play a prominent role in the formation and maintenance of memory" (Massad, Cynthia A and Klann, Eric, 2011, p 2)

Having experience from learning rather than just sitting down and being an observer is more beneficial in acquiring knowledge. Because it makes the stronger input loading to the students memory. This experience can be gained more through discussion and practise doing, the level of retention are 50% and 75% respectively (Queen's University Belfast, 2012). These activities give opportunity for the students to internalize the concept and then enrich the concept by discussion and learn from making mistakes. In practise doing technique, students have chance to express their understanding and revising their ideas to provide clearer description to others, before taking further step that is called conveying others through teaching others.

For further explanation, the other activity to enhance learning is what we call teaching others. It might be the most effective way to impose great input to students, by articulating their idea about the concept makes students strengthened their understanding about the learning subject. When students explain their belief about a concept it means they communicate their understanding to others. They have ideas and conveying their idea to others is a great brain activity to strengthened long term memory.

Experience of learning is profound aspect in learning process. Neil (2005), mentioned that John Dewey "proposed that education be designed on the basis of a *theory of experience*. We must understand the nature of how humans have the experiences they do, in order to design effective education. In this respect, Dewey's theory of experience rested on two central tenets -- continuity and interaction."

Human being are survive by learning from experience as the proverb says that experience is the best teacher. When we applied this idea to teaching practice means that teachers are supposed to be able to provide the environment and design activity to make students being active during learning process. Get the students involve actively in the learning process such as producing work, making question and the answer is in the form of a piece of writing.

The second believe is interaction which means the interweaving process of past experience and present one create understanding. So, the interpretation might be teachers design learning experience in every teaching session then interlace these experiences in continuous chain of learning experience. Therefore teacher design the learning activity and direct students to actively participate in learning process to get the most retention of knowledge and skill input.

Further more, to support the argumentation of the experiential notion, Edgar Dale's Learning Retention Rate gives us information that the most effective way to make students internalize concept is teaching others. It is approximately 90% value of effectiveness. To get sufficient time and space in doing writing, students deserve enough time to interact with faculty as a supporter and advisor during learning process. Surely, it will give indirect effect to support the approach of learning, learning by doing, to boosting gains in learning and development. (Gonyea, R M and Anderson, P. 2009)

To enable teacher facilitate students doing appropriately in acquiring learning input through experience and and 'teaching others' method, 150 minutes session and meeting twice a week is considered as sufficient learning time during a semester (Schulberg, J et al. 2007). This length of time provide both students and teachers interact intensively and ever interaction among students to have fruitful discussion during the teaching session.

When students are engaged in learning, vocabulary building will effectively work. In intensifying vocabulary building, students are not recommended to memorize independent words and it meaning. It means students will write or use the word into sentences. Rather than memorizing, directly use the new words in sentences will be much beneficial (Oxford R 1989 , p 60) There are various techniques for increasing vocabulary such as doing extensive reading, entry new word on the word list, or practising new words in group work. Teachers have privilege to decide which is the best for their class situation and condition. The more effective way to enhance vocabulary is writing. The more writing work we do the more vocabulary building works intensively. During writing process the production of words to convey the meaning will be very active, it means the students will do their best to find the exact words to communicate meaning. Therefore, having writing exercises are good for vocabulary building.

Problems with grammar such as awkward phrasing and unconventional grammar difficulty with sentence structure and word order can be limited by applying pedagogical method. This is the base of thinking that underlay the grammar error correction. Thinking of translating idea into English as a phrase or syntactical way rather than lexically, because translating word to word approach will not account for the success on the writing task (Brooks-Carson, A W & Cohen A D. 2006, p 413.) At the beginning semester of the first year, giving writing task using simple sentences is advisable then in line with the increasing writing capability compound and complex sentences will be employed.

Psycho-linguistic problem concerning with trouble generating ideas or elaborating on them. The solution that might be useful for teaching writing is providing the writing task

005), mentioned
of a theory of
ences they do, in
erience rested on

that experience is
that teachers are
e students being
ing process such
of writing.

process of past
might be teachers
e experiences in
ing activity and
most retention of

on, Edgar Dale's
to make students
ctiveness. To get
to interact with
ve indirect effect
s in learning and

ing learning input
and meeting twice
rg, J et al.2007) .
sively and even
ssion.

ffectively work. In
rize independent
sentences. Rather
official (Oxford R,
is doing extensive
up work. Teachers
dition. The more
we do the more
ction of words to
ir best to find the
ises are good for

entional grammar,
plying pedagogical
ction. Thinking of
lexically, because
the writing task (r
er of the first year,
with the increasing

s or elaborating on
g the writing task

about the topics that most interesting for the students. The other suggestion is design the writing task that make students write to someone they care. Students write about their work, or problems to their parents or friends.

CONCLUSION

Teaching writing in EFL situation is more challenging as limited exposure to English therefore the effort of supplying more exposure to English this institution can establish events where all students across departments can watch English language films. Also a budget dedicated to provide up-to-date books on EFL pedagogy and audio equipments for better teaching implementation in the class. Students needs repetition or do practice writing frequently to enhance both vocabulary repertoire and writing skills. Writing tasks done not inword to word translation rather then directly writing in English pattern and way of thinking.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, R.D. (2010). *The Failure of American Higher Education* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-d-atkinson-phd/the-failure-of-american-h-b-626289.html> [17 June 2012].
- Bearr, K.(2012). *TeachingWritingStrategies* [Online]. Available at: <http://esl.about.com/es/teaching.echnique/a/wrwrite.htm> [15 June 2012].
- Brooks-Larson, A. & Cohen, A.D. (2000). Direct vs translated writing: Strategies for bilingual writers. In M. Anderson, C. Klee, F Morris, B. Swierzbia, & E. Tarone (Ed). *The Interaction of Social and Cognitive Factors in SLA: Proceedings on the 1999 Second Language Research Forum*, Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press, (pp. 397– 423).
- Cobcu, A.D.(1987). Studying learner strategies: feedback on compositions. *Journal of Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand*, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok,17,2.
- Deb Peterson. *ETC, TOEIC Cao Do Levels Table*. Jakarta: PT. ITC [Online]. Available at: <http://adulted.about.com/od/teachers/n/teachingadults.htm> [6 May 2012]
- Felicia Utorodewo, (2011). Jakarta Post, 27April 2011
- Gonyen, R.M. And Anderson, P. (2009). *Writing, Engagement, and Successful Learning Outcomes in College*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
- Kolb, A. Y. & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 4(2), (pp.193-212).
- Leki H, (2002). *Research Insights on Second Language Writing Instruction*. University of Tennessee.
- Malone M H, (2011). *Assessment Literacy for Language Educators*. Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Massad, C A and Klann, F. (2011). Reactive Oxygen Species in the Regulation of Synaptic Plasticity and Memory. *Antioxid Redox Signal*. 15 May 2011, 14(10), (pp. 2013–2054).
- Neil, J. (2005). *John Dewey, the Modern Father of Experiential Education* [Online]. Available at: <http://wilderdorn.com/experiential/ExperientialDewey.html> [20 April 2012].
- Newflicds, T. (2003). Helping EFL students require academic writing skills. *Journal of Naarun Junior College*. Vol. 30. (pp. 99-120).
- Oxford, R L. (1989). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

- Queen's University Belfast. (2012). *Active and Interactive Learning* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/CentreforExcellenceinActiveandInteractiveLearning/BiosciencesProject/ActiveandInteractiveLearning/> [10 August 2012].
- Schuldberg, J. et al.(2007). Fear of the blank page: Teaching academic and professional writing in social work. *Across the Disciplines*, 4 [Online]. Available at: <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/schuldbergetal2007.cfm> [18 June 2012].