

GRAMMAR MATTERS: A STUDY OF FREE WRITING PERFORMANCE OF THE SIXTH SEMESTER STUDENTS, FBIB-UNISBANK

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Abstract

The current study explores possible errors or mistakes committed by the sixth semester students of English Letters Study Program, FBIB, Stikubank University in order to position the students' levels of writing performance against grammatical violation. Twenty students participated in the research by writing free compositions. Most of them wrote academic essays as they had thought that it was a good writing exercises prior to their main assignments—writing academic papers as their own final project. *Grammarly* software application was used to assess the students' writing. The findings indicated that the students performed considerably well in writing practice, yielding grades-A (65%), grades-B (20%) and grades-C (15%). In practice, grades-C shall have to retake the test for a little bit below the passing grades (but 'pass conceded'). Grades-D and E are 'Failed' grades. The dominant errors, according to *Grammarly*, were of (1) possibly confused prepositions, (2) missing comas, after introductory phrases, and (3) redundant indefinite articles. It is therefore recommended that the students keep practice writing since all grammatical features had been covered in their previous grammar classes.

Keywords: Keywords: writing performance, gramatical violation, Grammarly software application

1. Introduction

Faculty of Language and Cultural Studies (hereinafter referred to as FBIB) is one of the faculties offering a study program 'English Letters' to produce professional human resources in entrepreneurial expertise in English in accordance with UNISBANK as an entrepreneurial, IT-based university in Semarang. Each student of any faculty is equipped with entrepreneurial spirit as th specification in comparison with other similar higher educational institutions.

As we know, the language policy of Indonesia is that bahasa Indonesia is used as the medium of instruction in any educational setting from early education to college level (Simanjuntak, 2009:14; Paauw, 2009)). Apart from its function as a medium of instruction, bahasa Indonesia is also a compulsory subject throughout Indonesian formal education.

The underlying problem of the current study is that the use of bahasa Indonesia has to be restricted in a study program of English Letters. Some core subjects have to be delivered in English, even the subjects are named in English, such *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, *Performative Spoken English*, etc. More extremely, the students are also required to write their final projects in English for undergraduate, master or post graduate levels. This has

become a special challenge for the institution to equip the students with sufficient mastery of English with special focuses of writing and speaking proficiencies. It is not an easy task since the emergence of communicative approaches to language teaching. A good language user is simply identified as being able to communicate in the target language. Actually, there are at least two things missing, namely **accuracy** and **appropriateness**. It is true that native speakers of English may ignore inaccuracy or inappropriateness as far as the communicative purposes get across. However, accuracy in the use of English will indicate the level of education. This then creates a dilemma between accuracy and communication. Of course the best policy is ‘accurate communication’.

A recent study (Herdiawan, 2015) concluded that the sixth semester students of the English Department, Majalengka University made errors in essay writing under four categories, namely mechanics, tense, preposition, and subject verb agreement. The findings has challenged lecturers to reevaluate their teaching materials and methods in compliance with the students’ current linguistic competence and writing performance.

The current study focuses on writing accuracy, especially grammatical accuracy in response to the demands for completion of the final projects in which the students are required to write the reports in English.

The current study attempted to respond to the research questions: (1) What types of grammatical inaccuracy do most of the sixth semester students of FBIB UNISBANK make in Free Writing? (2) What is the most dominant grammatical inaccuracy do most of the sixth semester students of FBIB UNISBANK make in Free Writing? (3) What practical and theoretical implications does the current study probably have?

2. Method

Twenty randomly selected students of the sixth semester of the English Department, FBIB Unisbank participated in the study. They were assigned to write short (argumentative) essays. Grammarly software application was used to evaluate the essays in general sense and to identify the grammatical violations. In other words, data analysis was done by machines.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Barometer of Success

Presented herewith is a table generated by grammarly software application as a means of locating the barometer of success in the teaching of academic English

No	N	Det %	Fn %	Parti %	Lex %	Mec %	Nou %	Prep %	Σ err	Grade							
1	Subject1	1	5	2	10	0	1	5	0	5	B						
2	Subject2	4	20	1	5	0	0	2	10	0	7	C					
3	Subject3		0	3	15	0	0	3	15	0	6	B					
4	Subject4	5	25		0	1	5		0	1	5	7	C				
5	Subject5		0	1	5	1	5		0	0	1	5	3	A			
6	Subject6		0	1	5		0		0	0	0	0	1	A			
7	Subject7	5	25		0		0	1	5		0	0	6	B			
8	Subject8	1	5		0		0	2	10		0	0	0	3	A		
9	Subject9		0		0		0		0	1	5		0	1	A		
10	Subject10		0		0	2	10		0		0		0	2	A		
11	Subject11		0		0		0	1	5		0		0	1	A		
12	Subject12		0		0	2	10		0		0		0	2	A		
13	Subject13		0	2	10		0		0	1	5		0	0	3	A	
14	Subject14		0		0	1	5		0		0		0	0	1	A	
15	Subject15		0		0		0		0		0	2	10		0	2	A
16	Subject16	2	10		0		0		0	2	10		0		0	4	B
17	Subject17	1	5		0		0		0		0		0		0	1	A
18	Subject18	2	10		0		0		0	1	5		0		0	3	A
19	Subject19		0	2	10	3	15	1	5		0	1	5		0	7	C
20	Subject20		0		0		0	1	5		0		0		0	1	A
Total		21	105	12	60	10	50	6	30	11	55	5	25	1	5	66	
Grade A= 1-3 errors																	
Grade B= 4-6 errors																	
Grade C= >6																	

It can be seen from Table 1 that there were 20 students (subjects) participating in the research. Each subject wrote a free essay without any instruction whatsoever except ‘writing an essay of minimally one paragraph’ within 45 minutes. Most subjects wrote two paragraphs.

Table 1 also displays that there are 13 students achieving grade A (committing 1-3 errors), four students achieving grade B (committing 4-6 errors), and three students achieving grade C (committing more than 6 errors). Thus, it can be calculated that the students (subjects) got A (65%), and B (20%), and C (15%). In a real situation and context, those who got C shall retake the class in the next two semesters. However, for some lecturers, they may have a remedial teaching. In the name of student outputs in terms of productivity, a lecturer is supposed to have a remedial program for the students.

Grammarly, the software application used in the current study also commented on the quality of the paragraphs produced by the students. It is first of all argued that they were more accurate than 28% of Grammarly users. Secondly, as 570 unique words were used, it is further argued that the students have a larger coverage of vocabulary than 78% of Grammarly users. Finally, it is assumed that (1) they were possibly confused with the use of preposition. In general, most of the students performed considerably well in free writing. As previously mentioned, 85% of the students met the passing grades (65% with Grades A, and 20% with Grades B). In other words, the teaching processes can be considered

successful. The other students (15%) got C, meaning that they committed more than six errors in their free writing.

The dominant errors, according to *Grammarly*, were of (1) possibly confused prepositions, (2) missing commas, after introductory phrases, and (3) redundant indefinite articles.

The use of prepositions is always problematic, especially where English is a foreign language. This corresponds to a study by Loke et.al. (2013), concluding that:

“In utilizing a learner corpus, this study had shown that there were difficulties faced by students in handling preposition of time on and at in their writing. If teachers are perceptive to this, then they could implement appropriate teaching strategies to reinforce the students’ use of preposition of time. If this is done systematically, the learning of English will become meaningful” (Loke, et.al. 2013).

Meanwhile, the problem of ‘missing a comma after an introductory phrase’ needs a particular attention. This belongs to the mechanics of writing. It is true that mechanics of writing presents is problematic. It is also agreed by Hevny Muhyidin in his article entitled “An Analysis of Grammatical & Mechanical Errors in Writing Narrative Text” which has been uploaded in https://www.academia.edu/8147080/An_Analysis_of_Grammatical_and_Mechanical_Errors_in_Writing_Narrative_Text?auto=download. Muhyidin claimed that mechanical errors contribute to the half of grammatical errors since the errors in mechanics were 46 items—a half of 88 items of the overall grammatical errors in his research.

Finally the current study also identified redundant use of indefinite articles. The use of articles / determiners is always problematic to the students of English as a foreign language. This problem corresponds to a study by Nickalls, R. (2011), and another study by Świątek, A. (2013). They both agreed that the acquisition of articles were somehow psychological. This means that an individual can apply the correct choice of a definite article based on common sense or intuition or Chomsky prefers to call it linguistic intuition, such as the case of parsing sentences.

Discussed below are samples of essays which need to be in terms of the errors, the possible causes of errors and suggested correction by *Grammarly*. Subject’s names have deleted for ethical consideration.

Text 1

In the way people expressing their idea and opinion, sometimes with dramatic, concise, sarcastic, exaggerating and humorous method. It is for achieving the maximum effects from their audience. Joke or humor is kinds of communication that cannot dismissed for the people who interlaced connection each other or intimate friend. Sometimes it happened in movie as the entertainer or even in reality life. In these case the violation maxim occurred because they have understood each other what they are being state as a joke between listener and speaker.

Grice (in Wardaugh, 2006: 293) also states that conversation is a cooperative activity. That is when speakers and listeners can

understand each other in a conversation. They can share what they intend to share smoothly. They can accept each other's meaning despite the status, whether they are close friends, parents, teachers, sellers and buyers, and others. (Fatmawati, 2015:13)

The statement above implies the relation of speaker and listener, it is influence the maxim are used in communication, because they have understood each other. They did a communication as well as understood both of them. However it violates the appropriateness of maxim use. It is always happened in comedy as the joke for entertaining because speaker utterance sometimes out of the topic what being discussed.

- (1) In the way people expressing their idea and opinion, sometimes with dramatic, concise, sarcastic,exaggerating and humorous method.
- (2) They did a communication as well as understood both of them.
- (3) It is always happened in comedy as the joke for entertaining because speaker utterance sometimes out of the topic what being discussed.

Comments

The (1) is not a sentence since it has no finite verb. The possibly revised version is [In the way people expressing their idea and opinion, they sometimes employ several methods, such as being dramatic, concise, sarcastic, exaggerating and humorous.]

The (2) has a complex mistake as influenced by the mother tongue. Therefore, it may have to be rewritten as [They communicate in such a way to understand each other.]

The (3) has complex errors in finite verbs and determiners that should be revised as [It always happened in comedy as a joke for entertaining because the speaker's utterance is sometimes out of the topic under discussion.]

Text 2

The English language, although after evolving for more than 1500 years is now a less synthetic language (Lieber, 2016), has a set of inflections that indicate temporality. References to the past or past-time are differently marked in irregular and regular verbs and the scope of this study is the latter. The inflection *-ed* of verbs indicates pastness in both past participle and past tense forms (Celce-Murcia & Larsen and Freeman, 1999).

Allomorph refers to variant pronunciations of a morpheme determined by phonological, grammatical or lexical contexts. In the case of the additive allomorphs of *-ed* of spoken Standard English, they are represented by three variants that are phonologically determined by preceding sounds (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2003). The allomorphic features of the *-ed* inflection is summarized as follows in Table 1

Comment

It seems that the student (subject) tried to make a paraphrase of a paragraph from a textbook. However he / she failed to do so. He /she simply dropped few words, making the sentence not a correct sentence. The above two paragraphs can be revised as follows:
 [The English language, although after evolving for more than 1500 years, is now a less synthetic language (Lieber, 2016). It has a set of inflections that indicate temporality.]
 [References to the past or past-time are differently marked in irregular and regular verbs and the scope of this study is the latter. The inflection *-ed* of verbs indicates something happening in the past in both past participle and past tense forms (Celce-Murcia & Larsen and Freeman, 1999).]

[The allomorphic features of the *-ed* inflection **are** summarized in Table 1 as follows:]

Text 3

Types of violation maxim

According to Grice (1975) violation of maxim divides into four conversational maxims (1) as the following: Violation of Maxim of Quantity, Violation of Maxim of Quality, Violation of Maxim of Relation, and Violation of Maxim of Manner. Those are explained bellow:

1. Violation maxim of quantity

(2) Violation maxim of quantity (3) happen in the person/people when they are (4) doing conversation however the audience offers more or less information as required. Tupan& Natalia (2008:68) state that if the speaker violates the maxim of quantity, they do not give the hearer enough information to know what is being talked about, because they do not want the hearer to know the full picture. It means there is less information found by hearer however in (5) these situation listener and speaker (6) have been known each other.

2. Violation maxim of quality

(7) In violation maxim of quality people (8) did conversation however speaker offers (9) falls information or give the information to the listener however (10) it still not confirm that its information truly happen. They should not say what they believe to be false. Neither should they say that for which they lack adequate evidence (Rini, 2010:43). It means the information transferred to the listener or audience (11) still not confirm it is right information.

Comments and Corrections

- (1) As the following. This is not totally wrong but it is not appropriate because the information (items) that will be given is not written in the next line. Instead, it is given as a run-on phrase. Thus ‘as the following’ should be replaced with ‘such as’
- (2) Violation maxim. Something is missing here. This error is probably caused the native language as ‘*pelanggaran maksim*’ in which no preposition is required. In English, a preposition is required in such syntactic slot. The possible correction is therefore ‘insert of’ between these two words. This it should be rewritten as

‘violation of maxim’. The student should not have worried about the redundancy of ‘of’ that is ‘violation of maxim of quality’. This is OK.

- (3) happen. This is a minimum requirement mistake—finite verb. This verb should agree with the noun ‘violation’. A suffix –s shall be added to make it grammatically correct, (happens).
- (4) There is a wrong choice of verb, doing instead of making. A conversation should be made, not done. These two semantically problematic verbs may also happen in a phrase, such as to do an assignment or to make an assignment. The answer to such a problem depends on the nature of the sentence subject. A teacher makes an assignment but a student does an assignment.
- (5) “This situations’ is a wrong phrase. It can be meant ‘This situation, or These situations’. The use of either forms depends on the intention of the writer / speaker.
- (6) ‘have been known each other’ is really confusing verb phrase. The phrase should be rewritten as ‘have known each other’. Such an error may be caused by the fact that the writer’s concept was brought to his or her Bahasa Indonesia ‘saling kenal’.
- (7) The problem is similar to that of (2), ‘missing preposition’, thereby it should be revised as ‘In violation of maxim of quality’. It is assumed that the writer is confused by the Indonesian counterpart of ‘*pelanggaran maksim*’
- (8) Another similar mistake takes place. The word did should be replaced with made.
- (9) A spelling mistake occurs. ‘falls’ should be replaced with ‘false’. The two words (falls / false) have similar pronunciation despite the fact that a careful speaker can differentiate from one another. The word ‘falls’ is pronounced as [folz] while ‘false’ is pronounced as [fols].
- (10) The sentence ‘it still not confirm that its information truly happen’ is very poor. Not only does it contain one mistake (missing the finite verb) but also another mistake (wrong form of finite verb). It should be corrected to be ‘It **is** not confirmed that **the** information is **true**.’

4. Conclusion

It turns out that the sixth semester students of the English Department FBIB Unisbank have achieved a considerably good achievement of the writing skills, which, at the same time, indicates their readiness to write up their final project report. However, things, of course, have to be done systematically to improve or at least maintain the students’ writing competency and skills

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