Written Text of Selected Students: What It Tells about Their English Proficiency

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Abstract: *The aim of this study was to find out the students' proficiency in writing and the specific weaknesses in grammar committed by the students. Ten selected students from English Department, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto were selected as the sample for the study. Analytical scoring device was used to conclude the students' proficiency in writing. The analytical device has five subcategories: ideas, organization, grammar, punctuation, spelling and mechanics. Each subcategory was counted and described in the number of quantity to tell about the students' proficiency in writing. Contrastive analysis was used as part of the procedure to explain the occurrences of grammatical weaknesses. The results showed that 75% of students have fulfilled the standard minimum of essay and only 25% of them couldn't explore their ideas of the task give. 50% of students (5 students) have meet the expectation or they are proficient enough in exploring their ideas of writing, 20% of them were still need improvements and 30% of them were bellow the expectations.The students who met the expectation of writing organization share the same number (50%) with the students who below expectation (50%). No one of them has to exceed the expectation and need improvement in their organization. Fifty percent of students' essay have met the expectations in vocabulary, and this number is similar with those who still need improvement in vocabulary. The total number of errors made by ten freshman writing composition is 60. The subject verb agreement and preposition contribute the most number of errors.*
Key words: *proficiency, writing, grammar.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, proficiency in writing is absolutely needed by the learner of a second language, especially in the current era in which technology and communication are developed to help the human activity in their life. All people around the worlds are easily to be connected with each other through social media as a part of communication and technology supporting by English as a medium of communication. Having a competent proficiency in writing helps people around the world to connect each other and share their ideas easily.

Writing has to be learned and taught intentionally because students will be unable to write well if they do not learn to write. Writing instruction is, hence, important to conduct as early as possible. Some previous studies have proven an essential of writing. Writing is a social activity that can enact people (Hayland, 2007). It motivates students thinking, organize ideas, developing their ability to summarize and analyze (Rao 2007). It also has a positive influence on students language performance (Ahmed, 2010, Fauziati and Srfadz, 2011)

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Regarding the importance of writing, it is also important that the students who learn English as their foreign/second language to establish their writing proficiency in order to be a proficient writer. A proficient writer at least can meet the standard of writing indicators such as ideas, organization, vocabulary and mechanics.

It is also necessary for students to establish their awareness in grammar because it influences the quality and readability of their writing. To do so, teacher should know the students writing problems especially in their grammatical weaknesses in order to be placed at the useful instructional material. Instructional material which based on the students grammatical defects will be able to increase the student's awareness of writing the result of a good writing proficiency.

This paper will focus on examining students writing an essay of freshman. The result of the study will give a picture of students writing proficiency as well as some grammatical weakness. Students grammatical weaknesses as well as the causes of its error can be a valuable input in the instructional material to cover these weaknesses

METHODOLOGY

The present study is descriptive quantitative and qualitative in mode and nature. The focus of this study is aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What does the students' composition tell about the students' proficiency in writing?
2. What are the specific weaknesses in grammar committed by the students?

Ten selected students from English Department, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto were selected as the sample for the study. Those students are then asked to write the essay on the topic of "Teenage Pregnancy: Suggested Solution". This topic was given based on the familiarity of the topic in which the students were familiar with that issue so that they could explore their essay easily. The essays were administered at May 7, 2016.

Analytical scoring device was used to conclude the students' proficiency in writing. The analytical device has five subcategories: ideas, organization, grammar, punctuation, spelling and mechanics. Each subcategory was counted and described in the number of quantity to tell about the students' proficiency in writing.

The students' drawbacks, especially in grammar, then analyzed as the follow up discussion. This includes identifying, describing, and explaining the grammatical defects. Contrastive analysis was used as part of the procedure to explain the occurrences of grammatical weaknesses.

In order to know the cause of grammatical weaknesses, some students were interviewed where they were asked to explain why they used a peculiar structure if there was an error identified. They were also asked what they knew about the structures to check their knowledge of a certain structure. Those results then become a considerable input for the proposed instructional materials to cover these weaknesses

FINDING AND INTERPRETATION

Four indicators of students proficiency namely ideas, organization, vocabulary and grammar are discussed in this finding and interpretation regarding to the problems formulation above.

A. Ideas in Writing

Students essay was calculated in the number of ideas to know how far the students can explore the topic given. The scale of ideas is also analyzed to know the quality of students' idea as well as the scale of their idea

The most striking part of the students' essays was 75% of students have fulfilled the standard minimum of essay and only 25% of them couldn't explore their ideas of the task given. This finding reveals that students are familiar with the topic given and they didn't get any difficulties in exploring the idea of writing. A complete result can be seen in following table:

Table 1
Number of Students' Ideas in Writing

Respondent	Number of Idea	Criteria
1	22	adequate
2	12	inadequate
3	19	adequate
4	17	adequate
5	13	inadequate
6	18	adequate
7	14	inadequate
8	20	adequate
9	18	adequate
10	23	adequate

From the table above, the highest number of student's idea in writing is 23, while the lowest one is 12. The result of the interview revealed that the students who have an adequate idea in writing were familiar with the topic given, it made them easy to explore some ideas into their essay. Moreover, they said that the topic also had to be in conformity with their field of study in which they can write something about the lecture they got in their study. However, although the majority of students have to meet the number of ideas for an essay, 3 students still found themselves challenging to explore what they have in their mind. They could only produce less than 15 ideas. From the interview, these students are actually know well about the topic but they said that it was difficult for them to write a word that already has in their mind due to the lack of their vocabulary.

The subsequent analysis of students' ideas in writing is the scale of their ideas. 1 to 4 rank was used to inform the student's idea of writing and the complete explanation of writing rubric to reveal the student's scale of the idea can be seen in Appendix.

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The students' level of idea can be seen in following table:

Table 2
Level of Students' Ideas in Writing

Respondent	level of Idea	Criteria
1	3	Meets Expectations
2	2	Needs improvement
3	1	Below expectations
4	1	Below expectations
5	2	Needs improvement
6	3	Meets Expectation
7	1	Below expectations
8	3	Meets Expectations
9	3	Meets Expectations
10	3	Meets Expectations

The table above give us an information that 50% of students (5 students) have meet the expectation or they are proficient enough in exploring their ideas of writing, 20% of them were still need improvements and 30% of them were bellow the expectations.

Five students who have met the expectation have a clear central idea in writing. The ideas also could support the detail information and relevant with the topic given. Moreover, they could support the detail with good example and evident. This result revealed that 50% of students show a broad understanding of tasks given.

While 2 students who need improvement have a broad or narrow ideas in writing, it makes the central idea that they made were vague. They couldn't support the predominant idea with adequate example or evident. It revealed that these students show a particular understanding of task given

The central ideas and clarity of purpose of 3 students who were below the expectation were absent or incompletely expressed with little or no evidence of critical, careful thought or analysis. They were also produced mostly irrelevant supporting idea.

B. Organization of Writing

Organization is the structural framework for that writing. Organization is important to effective writing because it provides readers with a framework to help them fulfill their expectations for the text. A well-organized piece of writing supports readers by making it easy for them to follow, while a poorly organized piece leads readers through a maze of confusion and confounded or unmet expectations.

The results of students' organization in writing can be seen in following table:

Table 3
Number of Students' Writing Organization

Respondent	level of Writing Organization	Criteria
1	3	Meets Expectations
2	1	Below expectations
3	1	Below expectations
4	1	Below expectations
5	1	Below expectations
6	3	Meets Expectation
7	1	Below expectations
8	3	Meets Expectations
9	3	Meets Expectations
10	3	Meets Expectations

The students who met the expectation of writing organization share the same number (50%) with the students who below expectation (50%). No one of them has to exceed the expectation and need improvement in their organization.

Five students who have met the expectation in writing organization have apparently a clear organizational structure but some digressions, ambiguities or irrelevant structure still found in their writing. Moreover, the thought was easy to follow which allow the reader to move through the composition. It is also strengthened by the use of transition devices.

In contrast, five students who were below expectation in the writing organization have no apparent organization structure and missing part or all the introduction, body or conclusion. It then makes the reader difficult to follow the essay due to the limited or even no transition use in the essay.

C. Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the body of words that make up a language and a good vocabulary can help us write what we mean. The level of students vocabulary in writing are presented in table below:

Table 4
Vocabulary Use in Writing

Respondent	level of Vocabulary	Criteria
1	3	Meets Expectations
2	2	Need improvement
3	2	Need improvement
4	2	Need improvement
5	2	Need improvement
6	3	Meets Expectation
7	2	Need improvement
8	3	Meets Expectations

| 9 | 3 | Meets Expectations |
| 10 | 3 | Meets Expectations |

Fifty percent of students' essay have met the expectations in vocabulary, and this number is similar with those who still need improvement in vocabulary. Moreover, no one of them have exceed the expectation or below the expectation.

Students in level 3 has a varied vocabulary with a specific and appropriate word choice while students in level 2 were still use simple vocabulary with little variation on it. They also infrequently use specific vocabulary

D. Mechanic and Grammar

Students' level of grammar, grammatical error presentation as well as the instructional materials to cover this weaknesses/error will be discussed as follow:

1. Level of students' grammar and mechanic

The level of students' grammar and mechanic can be seen in following table:

Table 5
Level of Grammar and Mechanic in Writing

Respondent	level of Grammar	Criteria
1	3	Meets Expectations
2	2	Need improvement
3	2	Need improvement
4	2	Need improvement
5	2	Need improvement
6	3	Meets Expectation
7	2	Need improvement
8	3	Meets Expectations
9	3	Meets Expectations
10	3	Meets Expectations

Fifty presents of students have met the expectation in their grammar. They can produce a complex sentence with few grammatical error they are also competence in coordination and subordination. While similar number of them (need improvement in grammar) was still weak in their mechanics and produce number of errors that interfere the meaning at some points.

2. Students' Grammatical Error

The students' error in grammar from the highest to the lowest one can be seen in following table:

Table 6
List of Students' Grammatical Error

Type of error	Number of error
Subject and verb agreement	13
Preposition	13
Conjunction	7
Pronoun	4
Tenses	4
Determiner	3
Passive Voice	3
Phrasal Verb	3
Noun	2
Adjective	2
Adverb	2
Modal	2
Conditional	2
Total	60

The total number of errors made by ten freshman writing composition is 60. This includes 13 types of error of which the subject verb agreement and preposition contribute the most number of errors with 13 errors. The second errors are the one related to conjunction which covers 7 errors. This is then followed by a total of 4 errors in the aspect related to pronouns and tenses. In addition to this, an error related to determiner, passive voice and phrasal verb, a total of 3 errors were taken by 10 freshmen. Finally, the lowest error found to be common among most subjects concerns noun, adjective, adverb, modal and conditional which show a total of 2 errors.

3. **Discussion of Error**
   The two errors, subject-verb agreement and preposition, which consider as the high rank error will be discussed in this discussion.
   a. **Subject Verb Agreement Error**
      Subject verb agreement refers to the fact that the subject and verb in a sentence must agree in number. In other words, they both must be singular or they both must be plural. So we cannot have a singular subject with a plural verb or vice versa. Because of this consciousness, some students always make an error when they write a composition. It also happens in freshman essay which is being investigated. After In brief, the students' subject verb agreement error which is found in the writing composition can be categorized into 4 categories.
      1) Error on subject verb agreement with copula be
         Some students made a sentence that stating something using copula be, but they lack of awareness in subject and verb agreement, below are the error made by students related to it.

Table 7
Error on subject verb agreement with copula be

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
1	<u>Discipline and responsibility</u>is also a possible solution for teenage pregnancy teenage pregnancy	<u>Discipline and responsibility</u>are also a possible solution for teenage pregnancy.
2	and <u>other solutions</u> for this matter <u>is</u> through proper education	and <u>other solutions</u> for this matter <u>are</u> through proper education
3	not <u>all governmentare</u> in favor of this	not <u>all governmentis</u> in favor of this

The extract 1 above indicates that the students didn't aware of the use compound subjects. Compound subject are composed of several nouns or pronouns connected by "and, or, either-or, or neither-nor". Subjects connected by "and" almost always form a plural subject and demand a plural verb. The subject Discipline and responsibility is a plural subject and demand the plural verb (are)

In addition to this, "other "in extract 2 above is also a plural subject and it should be followed by plural object, so other solutions in second extract above is plural and should be followed by copula be "are"

In extract 3 above, it seems that student confuses with the use of indefinite pronoun "all" as a subject. "All" can be either singular or plural depending on the word they refer to is singular or plural. In the extract above all refer to "government", so it is singular subject and should be followed by singular verb (copula be "is").

2) Error on Subject verb agreement with there
Another possible error related to the subject verb agreement is on the use of "there is" and" there are" as can be seen in following table:

Table 8
Error on Subject verb agreement with there

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
4	But <u>there are</u> still <u>a solution</u> for that	But <u>there is</u> still <u>a solution</u> for that
5	This is the time where <u>there is no worries and doubts</u>	This is the time where <u>there are no worries and doubts.</u>

"There is" always use with singular subjects and "There are" with plural subjects. In extract 4 above, the word "solution" is singular subject so it is wrong to place "there are". In contrast when it is a plural subject such as "worries and doubts" in extract 4, it should be used "there are"

3) Error on Subject verb agreement with plural subject
There are 4 errors found from students composition related to subject verb agreement with plural subject. The list of error can be seen in following table:

Table 9
Error on Subject verb agreement with plural subject

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
6	both of them decides to use protection	both of them decide to use protection
7	there are not many job to be given to the people who needs it	there are not many job to be given to the people who need it
8	many studies shows that there are many teenagers….	many studies show that there are many teenagers….
9	Our society have been so corrupt nowadays	Our society has been so corrupt nowadays

Extract 6, 7 and 8 show the students misuse of using the indefinite pronouns "*both and many* " *in which it* takes plural verbs, so "both of them" and "many job" should be followed by plural verbs (verb without −s ending)

On the other hand, Extract 9 indicated the wrong concept of collective noun agreement. Collective nouns are words that refer to groups of people or things (e.g., *class*, *jury*, *family*, *crowd*, and *audience*). Collective nouns can be either singular or plural depending on the context of the sentence. If the context of the sentence makes you visualize the group doing something together, as one unit, then the noun is singular and takes a singular verb. If the context of the sentence makes you visualize different members of the group, performing different actions, such as "our society" then the noun is plural and takes a plural verb.

4) Error on Subject verb agreement with singular subject
The last aspect of subject verb agreement error made by students is related to singular subject. The eeror can be seen in following table

Table 10
Error on Subject verb agreement with singular subject

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
10	All of us has knowledge of how to prevent such a problem	All of us have knowledge of how to prevent such a problem
11	none of us has the discipline to do it	none of us have the discipline to do it
12	one ofthe most common problem among the youth would be early pregnancy	one of the most common problems among the youth would be early pregnancy
13	Indeed parents who know their children well are sometimes is the one who encourage their children	Indeed parents who know their children well are sometimes is the one who encourages their children

It is sometimes difficult for us when we find the subject as indefinite pronoun such as all because all (in extract 10 above) can

be either singular or plural depending on the word they refer to is singular or plural. In the extract 13 all of us is refer to knowledge which is singular, so it should be follow by singular verbs. On the other hand the indefinite one, none (extract 11, 12) is definitely require singular verbs. So it shold follow by singular verb (with –s ending)

Extract 13 shows that students confuse with the subject before relative pronoun "who", students think that this is a plural noun. However, the relative pronoun in extract 13 refers to singular noun (the one) and it should be use singular verb (with –s ending)

b. Error in Preposition

It is found that the students committed 3 kind of preposition error, namely error in prepositional verb, preposition noun and preposition adjective

1) Prepositional verb

   a. Missing preposition verb

     Some students miss to put preposition after verb as can be seen in following extract

Table 11
Missing preposition verb

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
14	They tend to think irrational things	They tend to think of irrational things
15	Being responsible the fine	Being responsible of the fine
16	…. to come up a solution on every challenges	……to come up with a solution on every challenges

     The extract above shows the students miss to put preposition before direct object. A direct object is defined as a words, phrase, or clause that receives the action of a transitive verb and prepositional Verbs are transitive and they have a direct object in sentence. Think of, responsible of and come up with are some examples of preposition verb

   b. Substitution

     Some students know that certain verb need a preposition to form a prepositional phrase. However, they are wrong in collocating the preposition with certain verb as can be seen in following table:

Table 12
Substitution error on preposition verb

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
17	they still have a dream to fulfill of their need	they still have a dream to fulfill in their need
18	..which can result to teenage pregnancy	..which can result in teenage pregnancy
19	they are engaged with this kind of problem	they are engaged in this kind of problem

It is clear that from the extract 17-19 the students misuse the prepositional verb "in" in which it collocate with fulfill, result and engage. It is due to their knowledge on preposition verb

2) Preposition noun
The next error in preposition is the coolocation of preposition after certain noun, as can be seen bellow

Table 13
Error on preposition noun

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
20	For me this can be a <u>solution for</u> teenage pregnancy	For me this can be a <u>solution to</u> teenage pregnancy
21	I believe that a <u>possible solution for</u> this matter is the guidance of the parents	I believe that a possible <u>solution to</u> this matter is the guidance of the parents
22	Teenage pregnancy is one of the <u>issue of</u> our society today	Teenage pregnancy is one of the <u>issue in</u> our society today
23	regret myself in the <u>future in</u> doing something	regret myself in the <u>future of</u> doing something
24	All of us have <u>knowledge on</u> how to prevent such a problem	All of us have <u>knowledge of</u> how to prevent such a problem

In above example, the learner made an inappropriate choice of putting the preposition after certain noun. For example noun "solution" should be followed by "to", "issue" with "in" and "future" as well as knowledge with "of". This errors happen due to the learner lack of knowledge in preposition

3) Preposition adjective
The last type of error made by students in preposition is the preposition after adjective as can be seen bellow:

Table 14
Error on preposition adjective

Extract	Incorrect	Correct
20	There's nothing <u>wrong on</u> having a baby at early stage	There's nothing <u>wrong in</u> having a baby at an early stage
21	it is <u>normal to</u> them	it is <u>normal for</u> them

Again the students made an error after certain adjective, when the adjective is "wrong" the preposition after it should be "on". Another is adjective "normal" should collocate with preposition "for"

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