

Strategies to Solve EFL Students' Problems in Writing

Meiga Rahmanita

*Department of Language, Communication and Tourism,
Politeknik Negeri Jember, Indonesia*

Corresponding Author Email: meiga.rahmanita@polije.ac.id

Abstract

People nowadays have realized that in learning a language, they also need to master the four language skills, including writing. Second language writing, then, is a necessity to be taught in the schools and universities. Yet, many still consider writing as a complex activity since the writers need to deal with the content, mechanical, and readers' expectation. That makes EFL students encounter many problems in writing. This article aims to share the strategies in teaching writing to solve students' problems in writing for all level.

Keywords: writing, writing problems, teaching writing strategies, online platforms

Introduction

In learning English as a foreign language, mastering writing skill as one of the goals that should be reached in the teaching and learning process, along with reading, speaking, and listening skills. Writing is meant to be a tool for the people to conceptualize everything they have in their minds in written way. In more detailed way, Sokolik (2003: 87) explains that writing is both of mental act and work of inventing ideas, thinking in what way we express them, and also organizing them into clear statements and paragraphs for the readers. In this way, he delivered an idea that the jobs in writing is not only finding the ideas and expressing them, but the writers also need to think about the best way to deliver them to the readers. In conclusion, writing is a process of transferring idea into written language. In second language writing, the language users learn how to express ideas and opinions in a text using their second and foreign language appropriately.

However, learning writing is not easy. Many have said that writing is the most complicated skill to be learned, as it requires mastery not only of grammatical element, but also conceptual element (Heaton, 1988: 135). Many students have encountered several problems in learning writing skills. Farooq, et al. (2012:192), for example, found in their research that some second language students in Pakistan had problem in writing due to having lack of vocabulary, being confused in grammatical rules, and L1 interference. These are some problem which can lead to the students being demotivated in practicing writing which, surely, affect the improvement of their writing skill. Hence, several things should be done to give solution to this matter. This article aims to share several strategies in teaching writing to overcome students' problems in writing by

mapping the problems which frequently appear first. In addition, this article is also expected to give contribution in teaching writing in English as a Foreign Language to solve students' problems in writing

Problems that the Students Encounter in Writing

As I have stated before, writing may be considered as the most complex language skill to learn and acquire. Many EFL students find several problems which make them difficult in improving their writing skill. According to Huy (2004: 64-66), Farooq, et al. (2012: 188-191), Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014: 41-43), Rahmatunisa (2014: 45-48), Bharati and Sthitaprajan (2016: 39-40), I concluded that the problems that the students encounter are spread in the pre-writing, whilst-writing, and post-writing activity. It means that almost in every activity that the students do in writing, they may always find problems.

In pre-writing activity, there are several problems that the students may find at most. The first is lack of motivation in doing writing activity as the students that writing is difficult. Having motivation in doing anything, not only writing, is important as it will influence what we do later. Thus, when the students feel lack of motivation in doing writing activity, it will also influence their writing activity as they may have already felt lazy to write anything or even only think about what to write. Triggering students motivation is important, as what Hashemian and Heidari (2013), who did a research related to the students' motivation and writing performance, found that participants who had positive attitude showed better practice in L2 writing than their friends with negative attitude.

Second problem is not having enough ideas about the topics that are going to be written. If the students do not know or do not have any idea about the topic given by the teacher, it will be impossible for them to start writing. They will not know what to write if they do not know about the topic at all or only have a little knowledge about it.

The last is they do not know how to start writing. For some people, starting to write is their biggest problem. It is not easy to decide in what way they are going to start their writing. Choosing and deciding the sentence that are going to open the introduction will also difficult, as in doing that, they also need to consider whether the sentence or things that they write the early paragraphs can catch the readers' attention and attract them to continue reading their writings. Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014: 42), who also found the same problem in their research, argued that as the students may always follow examples given by the teacher, they may find difficulties in making an introduction which requires originality from them.

Next is the problems that the students usually face in the whilst-writing activity. Just like in the pre-writing activity, the students also had various problems in the whilst-writing. First, the students have a hard time expressing their ideas. They may have known the topic and have ideas about things that they are going to write, but it is not impossible that they still do not know how to express the ideas that they have in their mind. Transferring the ideas in their minds into written form may not be as easy as it seems. For

the ideas in their mind is still abstract and may not be in a good arrangement, they need to rearrange them first when they write it down so that it can be understood by the readers.

The second problem is related to organizing the sentence and paragraph in a coherent way. Unorganized sentences and paragraphs may confuse the readers. Thus, the sentences and paragraphs need to be organized well. Unfortunately, many of the students are also still confused in how to do this. In a research that Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014: 43) have done, they found that the students gave less concern to the coherency of the ideas and paragraphs as they paid more attention to generate ideas. It also proves that generating ideas is very difficult for the students so that they should pay more attention to it.

Next, having limited vocabulary on the topic given becomes the third problems which students mostly encounter. Actually we can say that this vocabulary problem is a common thing in writing. Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014: 42) also found in their research that vocabulary has become second largest problems that the students face in writing. It is also the same as what Farooq, et al. (2012: 189) that vocabulary became the most frequent problem that the students faced in writing. It is possible that they may have many things to write and express, but they just cannot do it as they have limited vocabulary in writing it down using English. Also, they may choose the vocabulary which is not suitable enough in explaining their ideas so that the readers will misunderstand them. Thus, it will obstruct them in writing a good and effective text and improving their writing skill.

Last, not knowing how to write a correct English sentence is also one of the problems which the students need to deal with in the whilst-writing activity. This is related to the students' confusion in linguistic matters, such as grammar, article, punctuation, etc. Although seeming unimportant, they actually are also crucial for these linguistics features are the part of the language itself. One of the common problems that I often know happened to the students is they cannot decide what tenses that they should use when they are writing. They tend to stick to only one tense, no matter that they are writing about the event happens regularly or in the past. They are also confused about the using of article 'the' and 'a' in the text, and finally end up with not writing either 'the' or 'a' in their writings. Punctuation also becomes the biggest students confusion related to the linguistics matters in writing. Some students tend to write run on sentences without using commas, while the others seem like very fond in using full stops and commas in every sentence although they are not supposed to be put there. Based on the investigation that Rahmantunisa (2014: 46) did, it is influenced by the students' L1. As the students may be more familiar with writing in Indonesian that way, when they have to write in English they just simply use English words without really giving pay attention to the grammar, articles, and other linguistics features.

Next, there are also several problems that the students encounter in the post-writing activity. First, the students are not being given proper feedback or the feedback given is not really clear for them. Receiving feedback is very useful for the students, as they may be able to reflect from their own mistakes, learn how to fix it and not to do it again. Therefore, if they are given proper feedbacks, they will not be able to improve their quality of writing. This is also what the students proposed in the research done by Bharati

and Sthitaprajan (2016: 39), that they want the teacher give feedback in a straightforward manner, so that it will ease the students in making revision.

Furthermore, the students do not have enough time to practice writing. Since writing is not a skill which is easy to acquire, students need to practice it more in order to be able to master it. In his research, Huy (2015) concluded that since the students considered writing as a complex activity, having a little time to practice it became one of the factors that influenced students' poor performance in writing. Unfortunately, as writing is considered as an activity which really takes time, sometimes the teachers feel no urgency in emphasizing on this activity. Students are given less time to practice, which make them cannot train their writing skills.

There are still many things which can be considered as the problems that the students encounter in writing. These problems do not only appear in the whilst-writing activity, but also in pre-writing and post-writing activity. They can also make the students not be able to show their performance in writing and improve it. Hence, we as the teachers should find ways as the solution to solve these problems.

Strategies in Teaching Writing to Solve the Problems

After knowing and understanding the problems that the students mostly encounter in writing, as the teachers, we cannot let the problems obstruct their performance in writing. Several things should be done to help them overcome the problems. Therefore, I would like to elaborate several strategies in teaching writing to solve the problems. The strategies that I proposed is divided based on three main activities of writing; pre-writing, whilst-writing, and post-writing activity.

There are several steps that should be done in the pre-writing activity. First, begin the activity by giving an easy topic first. By giving a topic which is easy and familiar to them, it is expected that the students will get more ideas and have more knowledge about what they are going to write. Moreover, giving the topic which is interesting and/or closely related to their life will also encourage the students to write as they already know what they are going to write. It is a good beginning step to build students motivation in writing. The easiness level of the topic, however, can gradually be increased later. It also can be suited with their level of education.

Second, we should prepare several source materials (it can be in the form of news in the newspaper, articles, and so on) which are related to the topic and assign the students to read it before they start to write. Giving reading materials related to the topic actually gives many benefits. It can stimulate students' idea about the topic and give them an illustration about the words frequently used in the topic. We may ask them to highlight several specific words used in that topic and look for their meanings as a vocabulary activity in pre-writing activity. Also, the students can learn from the reading materials about how they should start their writing and what kind of opening that can attract readers' attention to read more. The students can also get a clear image about how to present their ideas and organize their sentences and paragraphs in a coherent way.

Besides, they can also get the example on how grammar and mechanics are used in the paragraphs that they are reading. In conclusion, by reading the source materials, the students will not feel completely lost in picturing how their writing should be. This is in line with what Brown and Lee (2015: 443) said, that the students write based on what they have observed on what has been written. Therefore, by reading, students can get some insight about how they should write and the topic of the text that they are going to write.

Third, we need to allow the students to discuss the topic with their friends. This activity is done to give the students an opportunity to expand their knowledge about the topic given. We can allow them to look for some additional information from the internet as well. By giving them a chance to expanding their knowledge, it will reduce the possibility of not knowing what to write. When the students have gathered and gotten enough information that they need, writing activity will be a lot easier for them.

Fourth, ask the students to do mind mapping first to conceptualize the ideas that they have in minds. This can also help the students to get an image about how they should organize their ideas in a sequential way; what should come first and later.

Next is the strategies which should be done in the whilst-activity, which can help the students solve their problems in writing. First is helping the students to organize their ideas into sequence sentences and paragraph from their mind mappings. Even though the students may have gotten a picture about how their ideas should be presented, it is still possible that they still do not know how to transform it into sequence sentences and paragraph. Thus, the teachers should help them to make it do it.

Second, we, as the teachers, need to encourage the students to write. We should do whatever it takes to make our students keep writing. It also means that we should give them proper help whenever they get stuck with their writings, since it can make discourage them to finish their writing. We need to be ready to assist them whenever they need us. By letting them know that the teachers will always pay attention to their process of writing and not ignore them whenever they get problems, the students will be more motivated in finishing their writings. Hence, in this whilst-activity, teachers' supports play a large role in solving students' problem.

Although in the post-writing activity the students may have finished their works, it does not mean that we no longer pay attention to it. There are several things that should also be done in this stage so that the students can handle their problems in writing well and improve their writing quality. The first thing to do is when we give feedback to the students' works, do it in a straightforward way. We should give the feedback in a way that the students understand and not make them more confused. If we do not deliver the feedback in a clear way, they will not be able to catch what things should be revised and ended up making the same mistakes again. Furthermore, we can also assign the students to do peer feedback. In this way, all students will learn from each other's work. While the students do peer feedback, we need to check whether they have done their job well or need help in doing it. As Hyland (2004: 177) said, feedback is important for the students as they will be able to see the readers' response to their writings and learn from it.

After we finish this feedback activity, we need to check whether or not they have understood their mistake. If they still do not catch what exactly the things that they should revise or how to revise it, we should give more explanation to them. After we are sure that all of them have understood their feedbacks, we should give them a chance to revise their works. As the activity of checking for students understanding on their feedback is done in the class, this revising activity can be done at home.

Another thing that we cannot forget is giving the students sufficient time to practice writing. Even if it cannot be done in the classroom, we can give it as their homework. We can also utilize the website or social media around the students to help them practice. The point here is we give them an opportunity for them to practice their writing skill more. As we all know, becoming skilled at writing cannot be done instantly. We need hours or perhaps months of practice to be good at it. Consequently, by giving them enough practice in writing, we will help the students to explore their writing skill and reduce the possibilities of encountering the common problems in writing.

Using Online Platforms in Writing Class

As technology has been growing rapidly around us, it is common for the teachers to bring it to the classroom. Our students live within technology. They are familiar with various online platform, such as websites and social media. We need to see this as an opportunity to combine the writing strategies mentioned earlier with the online platforms around the students. Therefore, it is expected that by utilizing them to the writing class and shifting the conventional way of teaching writing into something new, the students' skill and motivation in writing will increase as they will deal with something that they like and are familiar with.

There are many online platforms that can be used in writing class. Instagram is one of them. Wahyudin and Sari (2018: 4-6) found that the students performed better in the blended writing class using instagram. It was also reported that they also show positive attitude toward the use of instagram in their writing class. Instagram has become our students' life. By utilizing it in our writing class, we give our students a chance to practice writing in such a familiar way.

If we want to facilitate our students to practice writing longer text, we can also use blogging platforms, such as Tumblr, Blogger, Wattpad, and WordPress. Unlike instagram which only allows 2.200 characters in its caption limit, those blogging platforms provide way more than that. Thus, they are suitable if we want to assign the students to write an essay. Many have gotten positive impacts from utilizing these blogging platforms in their writing class. Rahmanita and Cahyono (2018: 983) reported in their research that the ability of undergraduate students in writing argumentative essay improved after using Tumblr in their Argumentative Writing class. Most of the students also had a good opinion on the use of Tumblr in their class. Next, Wattpad has also successfully improved the vocational high school students' writing performance. The atmosphere of the class during teaching and learning activity was become more interactive as well (Adiningtyas,

2020: 174). Hence, it is safe to say that using blogging platforms will benefit positively in the writing class.

In teaching creative writing, there is one online platform that is perfect for it; which is Storybird. It is initially a website, but now it is also available in the form of mobile application. In Storybird, the users are able to create and share their creative writing, and connect with other people using their written works. This digital storytelling website provides several arts which can be used to decorate and illustrate the users' story (Rahmanita and Agustina, 2017: 95). It definitely will give a new atmosphere in the creative writing class.

The interesting part in utilizing those online platforms in writing class is we can easily share and give feedback to each other's work in the comment section provided by each online platform. This, of course, will make it easier for the students to get and learn from the feedbacks that they get. Also, as the written works uploaded can be seen by public, it will enhance the students' confidence as well. They also get the additional hours needed for practice their writing skill in such a fun way other than just practicing writing in a piece of paper. Lastly, practicing writing using these platforms is easy and practical as they are available in the form of mobile applications and can be accessed anywhere as long as the internet connection is available. Therefore, combining the writing strategies done in pre-writing, whilst-writing, and post-writing activity that have mentioned earlier with the use of those online platforms is expected to solve the students' problems in writing

Conclusion

In learning writing, many EFL students still find several problems. These problems are so various; ranges from motivation, content, organization, linguistics features problems, up to lack of feedback and practice time, which can make the students neither improve their writing skill nor be motivated at writing activity. Hence, to solve the problems, there are several strategies implemented in the pre-writing, whilst-writing, and post-writing activity which the teachers should do; giving an easy and interesting topic, giving and assigning the students to read source materials, allowing them to discuss the topic, assigning them to do mind mapping, helping and encouraging them in the writing process, also giving them proper feedback and enough time to practice writing. Also, several online platforms can be utilized in the writing class to make their writing activity become more interesting. By doing these strategies, it is expected that students will get appropriate help to solve their problems in writing and, therefore, can improve their writing skill and motivation.

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