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EFL Students' Ability in Writing Reviews for a Novel at a University in Medan

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Abstract

This research aimed at investigating the ability of the fourth semester English Education Department students at the University of Potensi Utama, Medan, in writing a review text of a novel entitled 'Sengsara Membawa Nikmat' written by Toelis Soetan Sati. This study applied a qualitative approach through writing tests as the data collection instrument. The data were, furthermore, analyzed by identifying and evaluating the students' writing test. The result reveals that overall, the students' review texts on the novel were good enough. However, some problems were still noticed in the students' texts such as the errors in vocabulary, grammar, generic structure, organizing ideas, mechanic (punctuation and spelling) and the summary of the novel. It implies that while the students' performance was generally satisfying, their ability to write a review text needs to be consistently improved to produce a better piece of a review text on a novel.

Keywords: Writing, review text, novel, *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is always produced, exchanged or received as text; that is, language as a system of communication is organized as cohesive units which we call texts. A text is any completed act of communication such as a greeting between friends in the street,

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a television advertisement, a novel, or a film and so on. As far as speech and writing are concerned, a text stands alone as an act of communication.

Harmer (2004) states that writing is one of the four language skills taught in EFL classrooms apart from listening, speaking and reading. It is important for students at all grade levels, beginning from elementary school to graduate levels. The research revealed that for each grade level, students can improve their learning through writing (Benson, 1991; Dillon et al., 1994; Fellows, 1994). When students write, they learn from their writing because they create a text that includes ideas with relationships among them. In addition, when students are expected to write a text with a specific goal in mind, this method will help them to better understand relationships among ideas and then evaluate them to make new meaning from those ideas (Klein, 1999). Writing activities can improve learning or create new learning opportunities because when students write about a text, they need to gather and organize information, which in turn enhances knowledge or understanding (Durst & Newell, 1989; Klein, 1999). Thus, students, regardless of their grades, should be motivated to do writing activities with different goals in mind and across content areas.

Moreover, the importance of writing lies in its ability to help learners think. When students write about content, they use a complicated process that requires them to connect their thinking to the content learned. It means that when students write about content, they have a better understanding of the text they have read. Langer and Applebee (1987) believe that writing shapes thinking through the natural act of writing. Moreover, when writers are aware of their thinking during the writing process, they are better able to learn the content (Hebert et al., 2013).

Since writing is important to be taught, some types of text need to be learned at the university level, one of which is review text. Review text is composed to criticize or evaluate an artwork or event for a public audience (Sudarwati & Grace, 2006). Similarly, Gerot and Wignell (1995) mention that review text serves to weigh, assess and submit a criticism of the work or events that are examined (Gerot & Wignell, 1995). Review text is a text to re-explain the latest automotive products as well as the latest films, discussions of prominent figures and other things that are popular in the community. It is also stated that review text must be related to products that exist in the real world, not just narratives with the theme of ordinary imagination.

However, despite its importance, writing is a difficult skill to be learned by EFL learners (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2014). Babala (2012) states that writing is considered as a difficult language skill which must be learned by learners to convey their ideas. Richards and Renandya (2002) said that the difficulty is due not only to the need to generate and organize ideas using an appropriate choice of vocabulary, sentence, and paragraph organization, but also to turn such ideas into a readable text. Besides, "fluency is a writing aspect which is difficult to be learned by low and average proficiency students" (Hiew, 2010, p. 23). A writer must make written products not only in a smooth way and without hesitation, but also in a good grammatical structure and a good order to make readers understand the intended purpose.

Additionally, the students' problems in writing can also be caused by the fact that they cannot write freely because they are constrained by the genres of their writing. Harmer (2004) states that writing is a process heavily influenced by the constraints of genres. A writer needs to follow the conventional standards of descriptive text, for example, if he or she wants to produce a descriptive text. Similarly, those who desire to compose a narrative, process, or review text must comply with the components of

these texts. It, then, means that these components have to be present in learning activities. Generally, Hughes (2003) and (Starkey, 2004) state five components which must exist in every text. These include organizing idea, grammar/language use, vocabulary, mechanics, and organization/generic structure.

Based on the problems above, the researchers want to know the students' ability, problems and the causes of these problems in writing review text. Specifically, the problem formulations in this research are: (1) how well do the students write interpretation part of a review text on "*Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*" novel?, (2) How well do the students write the orientation part of a review text on "*Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*" novel?, (3) how well do the students write a summary of a review text on this novel?, and (4) how well do the students write an evaluation part of a review text on this novel?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Writing

According to Sampson (1985, p. 27), "writing is a system of representing utterances of a spoken language utilizing permanent visible marks." It means that writing represents a group of permanent letters or symbols. According to Nöth (1995, p. 259), "writing is a system of human intercommunication by visible marks." Therefore, writing is marked on a surface as a means of communicating ideas by making each symbol stand for an idea. Furthermore, Harmer (2004) states that writing is a media of communication through writing message. He further acknowledges that as a method of communication, writing could be used to establish and maintain contact with others, transmit information, express though feeling and reactions, entertain and persuade. Based on the opinion above, the author can conclude that writing is an activity of using letters, words, or symbols which are written by hand or typing to express ideas or information.

2.2 Review Text

A review is an evaluation of a publication, product, service, or company such as a movie (a movie review), video game, musical composition (music review of a composition or recording), book (book review); a piece of hardware like a car, home appliance, or computer; or an event or performance, such as a live music concert, play, musical theatre show, or dance show. Review text is a text that serves to weigh, assess and submit a criticism of the work or events that are reviewed (Gerot & Wignell, 1995).

In constructing a review text, we need to follow its generic structure and language features. Generic structure is defined as a device that supports communicative purpose. The communicative purpose of review text is to criticize events or works of art for the general audience or listeners, such as films, shows, books, etc. Generic structures of review text are divided into a) Orientation in which the background information of the text is presented, b) Interpretative recount which is an optional, recursive part which summaries the plot and provides an account of how the reviewed rendition of the work comes into being, c) Evaluation which is a recursive part providing an evaluation of the work, d) Evaluative summation which is also optional part providing a kind of

punch line which sums up the reviewers' opinion of the art event as a whole. Apart from having a generic structure, review text also has its unique features. They can be identified with a focus on specific participants and uses of adjectives, elaborating and extending, and metaphorical language (e.g. "the wit was there" or "dexterously ping panged to and from").

Related to the students' writing in review text, there are some common problems faced by the learners (Bahri & Sugeng, 2009). Grammar is the first problem encountered by learners who learn how to write a review text. The second problem relates to linking their ideas in which the learners can't connect their ideas smoothly. The third problem pertains to the organization in which the students get confused in writing orientation and interpretative recount. The last problem is vocabulary in which the learners are apt to using inaccurate vocabulary.

2.3 Novel

A novel is a form of literature which is also called fiction. In fact, in its later development, novels are considered synonymous with fiction. The word novel comes from the Italian language, *novella*. Sudjiman (1998) says that novels are imaginary prose that presents characters and displays a series of events and structured settings. The novel is also an art form that studies and examines aspects of life and good moral values in this life and directs the reader to the noble character. Sumardjo (1998, p. 29) says that "novel is a story with the prose form in long shape which means the story including the complex plot, many characters, and various settings".

However, how the messages in a novel are interpreted varies greatly. Usually, an author tries to guide readers to interpret a work in accordance with his or her expectations. However, in some works, readers are expected to guess and conclude the meaning of the novel story in accordance with their respective understandings. There is no guarantee that readers will be able to grasp the meaning in a novel story according to the expectations of the author. However, there is always one dominant meaning which is typically understood by different readers. These days, most readers try to understand the meaning of a novel by using the western perspective, which is logo centric in nature. It means that the western perspective tends to rely on binary opposition which views one thing is better than the other. This makes readers tend to believe in one dominant meaning as absolute truth so that they do not see or judge literary works objectively with two-way assessment through two different perspectives.

One of the novels which have a life lesson is "*Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*" written by Toelis Soetan Sati. This novel tells the story of Midun's trials and live problem. That problem was caused by a nephew of the ruler in his village, called Kacak. Kacak really hated Midun because of his beauty and his behavior. Kacak hoped that people liked him just as they respected Midun. Because of Kacak's insolent attitude, the villagers hated him. This made Kacak jealous and vengeful towards Midun so that he tried constantly to harm Midun. With patience and sincerity, finally, Midun could get out of his problem and lived a better life. In the end, Midun's life was full of happiness as a result of his patience, hard work, and honesty. Meanwhile, Kacak was precisely arrested by the police for misusing his position.

3. METHOD

This research was conducted by using the qualitative approach because the researchers analyzed the phenomena about the students' ability in writing a review text and the problems faced when they wrote it. To collect the data, the researchers did the test to know the percentage of the students' ability in writing a review text of a novel titled *Sengsara Membawa Nikmat* by Sati (1929). According to Arikunto (2006), a test is a set of questions, exercises, or others to measure the skills, knowledge, intelligence, achievement or attitude of an individual or a group. The researchers gave the test to the students in which they had to analyze the novel based on the components of writing test, namely content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics (Jacobs et al., 1981). The test was administered five times within five weeks. The students' test were examined and given the score ranging between 0 and 100. In this research, the researchers used the simple formula proposed by Gay (1981) in analyzing the data tabulation and then comparing the students' mean score to determine which writing component received the highest score. The formula is as follow:

$$X = \frac{\sum x}{N}$$

Description:

X = Average value

$\sum Xi$ = Amount the value of all students

N = Number of students

Furthermore, the data source of this research was a number of 44 students from the fourth semester enrolling in the English Education Department at Universitas Potensi Utama Medan.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The results are presented by showing the percentage of each writing components in the table, followed by commentary data. As mentioned earlier, there are five writing components assessed to measure the students' ability in writing a review text on a novel. Table one below illustrates the students' performance measured how many percentages on each writing component the students received.

Table 1. The students' score on writing review test on the post-test.

No	Aspect of Writing	Score	Interval Percentage	Criteria
1.	Vocabulary	67.8 %	66-79	Good
2.	Grammar	69.3 %	66-79	Good
3.	Generic structure	73.2%	66-79	Good
4.	Organizing idea	65.5 %	56-65	Fair
5.	Mechanic	70.4 %	66-79	Good

It is obvious from the table above that for the vocabulary test, the students got between 66 and 79 or similar to 67.8%. It means that the students' vocabulary mastery

was good. They knew the right vocabulary that they wanted to write. Moreover, the students were able to apply correct grammatical rules on the read texts. From the test, it could be seen that the score that students got for the grammar ranged between 66 and 79 or 69.3%. Most of them knew what tenses had to be used in writing a review text.

As far as the generic structure is concerned, the students' interval score was between 66 and 79 or 73.2%. The students were able to organize their review text based on its generic structure. They knew to place the sentences based on the generic structure of a review text. Moreover, when students did the test of organizing idea, their interval scores ranged between 56 and 65, equivalent with 65.5% and those within this percentage is considered as having a fair ability. Compared to other components, however, the students' ability in organizing the text was the lowest because they did not focus when they read the novel. Therefore, they got a little confused to organize the idea of the text which they read. Finally, as regards to the mechanic test, the students' scores were between 66 and 7 or 70.4% and thus it was deemed as being good. They understood how to use punctuation well and write words with correct spelling.

4.2 Discussion

Regarding vocabulary, the students' ability to write review text was good because the students used accurate words. Therefore, their writing was easy to understand. As stated by Olson (2005), one of the best ways to accurately convey the writers' idea in their writing is choosing the vocabulary accurately. Moreover, most of the students were able to write the review test of "*Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*" novel by not repeating the same words frequently. However, the difficulties faced by them were using figurative sentences. They had to write appropriate figurative sentences to picture the situation in the novel.

In addition, the students' grammatical ability was good. In writing a review text of the novel "*Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*", the students were able to use grammar appropriately. This ability is quite crucial because if students cannot use grammar properly, they cannot acceptably express their ideas. For this reason, Gleason and Ratner (1998) mention that grammar is the rules for forming acceptable utterances of the language.

The third component assessed to measure the students' writing ability in composing a review text is a generic structure. Students had good knowledge related to generic structure because they made fewer mistakes in the generic component of writing. They successfully combined and ordered introduction, evaluation, interpretation, and summary well. However, out of all generic structures of a review text, the students needed to make further improvement on writing evaluation and interpretation parts. Although the students' performance on the generic structure was overall good, there were still some students who did not follow the correct organization of a review text. These students tended to directly write the summary part.

The fourth component assessed was organizing idea. The idea is the most important component of writing. Students must be able to organize and arrange ideas well. Related to organizing the ideas, some students performed well since they knew what they wanted to write after they read the novel "*Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*". They were able to write their review text with the right idea. However, most of the

students' ability in organizing the idea is weak because they could not manage the ideas well. This condition happened because most of them just wrote the summary. Although they used grammar and vocabulary accurately, the way they organized their idea did not improve. It occurred when they read a novel, they could not develop their idea because they were not focused on the important information of the novel story.

The final aspect of writing a review text was the mechanic. The focus of mechanics was on spelling and punctuation. For this component, the students had a good ability because there were infrequent errors related to punctuation spotted in the students writing. They knew how to use the punctuation well. Moreover, the spelling of the words was good because the students could use the words appropriately based on the context. However, there were indeed a few students who still made mistakes in spelling and punctuation.

5. CONCLUSION

This research showed that the students' ability in writing a review text on a novel titled "*Sengsara Membawa Nikmat*" was generally good. The students' score in vocabulary got an average value of 67.8%. Meanwhile, their knowledge of grammatical aspect was good because their average score on it was 69.3%. Similarly, the students' generic structure of a review text was considered good with an average value of 71.7%. However, the students' knowledge related to organizing the idea was fair with an average value of 65.5%. Although the knowledge of organizing idea was the least among the students, it did not influence the students' ability in writing review text. Finally, the students' knowledge about mechanic was good with an average value of 70.4%.

Moreover, while the students' overall performance in writing a review text was good, the fact that there were still some problems faced could not be denied. Those problems were generally caused by the first language interference and the students' lack of knowledge about the components of review text. To solve these problems, the students have to practice writing different genres, so that they can improve their ability in writing, especially their mastery of vocabulary and grammar. When they can improve vocabulary and grammar, the students can be easy to organize ideas when they produce a piece of writing, regardless of the genres.

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