AN ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' WRITING GIVEN BY TEACHERS AT MAN KOTO BARU PADANG PANJANG

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Abstract

This research was based on the phenomenon that the student's writing ability was still low. It was assumed that there were two main factors influencing the students' writing. One of them was about facilitating the students with appropriate written feedback. In line with that, this research was a kind of descriptive study, which was aimed at figuring out the focuses of written feedback given and the techniques used by the teachers in giving the written feedback on students' academic writing, in this case, the students were asked to write a paragraph, at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang. Participants of the research were all English teachers there. Furthermore, the data were collected by using two instruments, documents, and interviews. The findings showed that, firstly, almost all of the written feedback items were provided to help students with their grammatical mistakes or forms of the writing, it was proven by the percentage that 99.66% of the written feedback items were focused on forms, the most dominant one is on S-V agreement and the least dominant one deals with the usage of adverb, whereas only 0.34% of the written feedback items were focused on contents. Secondly, there were two written feedback techniques applied by the English teachers, they were written commentary and minimal marking techniques.

Keywords: Written feedback, students' writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Being able to write is not as easy as speaking or reading. The researcher assumes that the failure and success of the students' writing are caused by two factors, internal and external factors. This assumption also emerged from some previous studies done by some researchers; one of them was conducted by Nacira (2010). She states that the difficulty in writing lies not only in generating and organizing ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable texts. In addition, the difficulties are also derived from teachers' approaches, methods, teaching techniques, and ways of reacting to students' writing productions. The idea can be understood that generating and organizing ideas as well as translating these ideas into readable texts are internal factors that derive from students. Furthermore, the writing products are also affected by the external factors which generally deal with the teachers' approach, teachers' technique in teaching writing, the class atmosphere, and also the one that cannot be put away from the writing process which is known as giving proper feedback toward students' writing.

The existence of proper feedback will give benefit students' writing. Peterson (2010) says "teachers provide feedback on students' writing to support students' writing development and nurture their confidence as writers". It means that the feedback is one of many ways that can help the students' development in writing as well as keep their motivation high as a writer. One of them was done by Ferris and Roberts (2001). They observed that students who received any kind of feedback significantly gave better writing products than those who did not receive any feedback. This research is also supported by an argument given by Kwun-Man (2004). He argues that most writing instructors believe that providing students with effective feedback on their writing is vital as it helps students to correct their own mistakes and be more independent.

Furthermore, the feedback itself does not only provide the students with grammatical feedback but also the content as well as the organization of the writing. In line with that statement, Fathman and Whalley (1990) say that

teacher feedback can be in the forms of content and form feedback. It means that the content refers to comments on the organization, ideas, and amount of detail, while form involves comments on grammar and mechanical errors.

Referring to those phenomena discussed above, it comes to a conclusion that there are two main factors that influence the students' low writing ability which is internal and external factors. One of the crucial external factors is derived from the way the written feedback was given by teachers on students' writing products. Dealing with the issue, this research tried to figure out the focus of written feedback given by the teachers and the techniques used in giving the written feedback at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 The Concept of Written Feedback on Students' Writing

As one of the important processes, feedback is expected to give a significant effect on the students' writing. Some experts have stated that the feedback will be very beneficial for the students. One of them is Brown (1994). He states that

providing effective feedback will be one of the keys to successful learning. Written feedback has been categorized into the types known as direct and indirect written feedback. Farrokhi (2012) defines direct written feedback as the provision of the correct linguistic form or structure by the teachers to the learners above the linguistic errors. On the other hand, the indirect written feedback only clues the errors and lets the students think and make the revisions over those mistakes. In line with that, He (2003) states that indirect written feedback indicates some errors without explicit attention drawn.

In addition, Gipps (1994) regards that written feedback as a critical feature of the teaching and learning process. By providing indirect written feedback, it is hoped that the students will be more critical and will be able to figure out the meaning of the codes given to them.

Furthermore, William (2003) adds that the most prominently used written feedback method falls into two common categories, they are the feedback on form and the feedback on content. Feedback on contents mainly consists of written comments by teachers on drafts that usually point out problems and offer suggestions for

improvements on the next draft. The written feedback on content will be more helpful and appropriate for intermediate or advanced students who have been good at grammar.

In brief, feedback as one of the processes in writing still needs to be considered in order to help students in improving their writing skills. In addition, written feedback means any comments or marks given on students' pieces of writing. The written feedback might be explicit or implicit; it depends on the teachers' interests or the students' needs.

2.2 Focuses on Teacher's Written Feedback toward Students' Writing

Here, some experts have discussed theories related to how to respond. They argue whether the written feedback is only in the term of form-focused feedback or content-focused feedback. The term form-focused written feedback refers to any responses in which the emphasis of the responses only takes place on grammatical and mechanical aspects. Ferris (1999) says that form-focused feedback cannot be abandoned since students rely heavily on it to improve their grammar in writing. He emphasizes that the existence of form-

focused feedback will affect positively students' grammar, especially for novice writers. This argument is also supported by Ashwell (2000) by comparing content-focused feedback. He argues that feedback on content has only a moderate effect on revision because the students really depend on form feedback.

Another term that is also found to enhance the quality of the students' writing is content-focused written feedback. Some experts have argued the advantages of giving written feedback on the content of students' writing. Zamel (1985) states that exposing the students to grammatical feedback only is not enough, there is a need for more content-based feedback. In line with that argument, Truscott (1996) states that grammar correction in writing classes should be abandoned since it is not only inefficient but also rather harmful. In other words, these two experts emphasize that giving written feedback on the students' grammar only is not enough.

In addition, there are various ways that can be done in providing written feedback. Here are some written feedback techniques

proposed by O'Muircheartaigh (2002) and other experts:

a) Tick Charts

This kind of technique is rarely found in the field, this technique uses a chart that has some items containing some aspects that teachers want to give feedback to their students. The students' writing is analysed through the aspects in the chart. It is usually done by preparing the chart in advance.

b) Correction Codes

Correction codes seem to be the most popular way to deal with learners' written work. They involve placing little symbols beside the problems and letting the student work out the problems. Ideally, the students must be able to find out the correct version from the feedback given.

Furthermore, Hyland (2003) mentions "the correction codes technique makes the correction neater and less threatening than masses of red ink and helps students to find and identify their mistakes". To conclude, this kind of technique is commonly used by English teachers and it is really useful to help students to be critical and such

kinds of code look neat compared with markings.

c) Peer Reviews

Another technique that is mostly used by writing teachers is by asking students to exchange their writing and let their peers comment and give suggestions toward it. This technique can be done in the classroom or outside the classroom. With this technique, the students do the written work at home and then bring the piece to the class. They hand it to their partners, who then assess the work and give comments.

d) Written Commentary

This technique involves writing detailed comments on the problems that exist in the learners' work. The idea is to guide the learner so that they can try to self-correct. At times this may not be easy or possible for them so the teacher might want to give them the correct version or advise them on where in their dictionaries or grammar books they are able to find the correct answers.

e) Minimal Marking

This technique is similar to using correction codes but not as obvious. Instead of having different symbols for different types of

problems, the idea is that a teacher writes an X in the margin for every language error in the line, i.e., two errors, two X's. The students not only have to find the problems, but also work out what type of problems they are as well. From the teacher's point of view, the technique is a quick one and this idea again works well with surface errors. On the other hand, sometimes some students may find it a lot more frustrating than the correction codes if the teachers do not provide this activity with guidance.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was descriptive research since the main aim of this research was to find out the focuses of written feedback given and the techniques used by the teachers in giving the written feedback on students' academic writing; in this case, the students were asked to write a paragraph. Gay (2009) state "a descriptive study determines and describes the way things are. It involves collecting data in order to answer questions about the current status of the subject or topic of study". It means that in this research, the researcher relied on the view of participants and data found in the field to figure out things that were related to the topic of this research.

Another instrument used in this research was an interview. It was used to collect deep information, confirm, and clarify the data that had been gathered through documentation. The interview was conducted in the form of a face-to-face interview in which the researcher met one English teacher and asked several questions based on the interview guide.

This research was conducted in one of the senior high schools in West Sumatra, MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang. It is located in the Koto Baru district. The participants of this research were the English teachers at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang. Totally, there are six English teachers there. The researcher used two instruments during the research which are documents and interviews. Documents were used to answer the focuses of written feedback given by teachers toward students' writing and the written feedback techniques used by the teachers. These documents were analyzed to see the focus of the given feedback and the techniques applied by the teachers.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1   Finding

4.1.1 Focuses on the Written Feedback Given by the Teachers

To identify the focuses of the given written feedback, the researcher collected the students' writing which had been responded by all the teachers, and grouped them. The table below shows the written feedback items provided by all the teachers.

Table 1. Focuses of Written Feedback Given by All Teachers

No	Teachers	Focuses of Written Feedback and Their Percentage				Total
		Form	%	Content	%	
1	A	223	100	0	0	223
2	B	270	98.54	4	1.46	274
3	C	308	100	0	0	308
4	D	378	100	0	0	378
5	E	263	99.25	2	0.75	265
6	F	296	100	0	0	296
	Total	1738	99.66	6	0.34	1744

The table above describes that almost all of the written feedback items focus on the form of the writing. It is proved by the total percentage of written feedback items given by all participants (English teachers), in which 99.66% of the given written feedback items focus on the forms of writing, while only 0.34% of the written feedback items are on the contents of the writing. In detail, it is described that there are four teachers, teachers A, C, D, and F, who give all of the written feedback items to help students work on the form of their writing. Otherwise, two teachers, teacher B and E, put few written feedback items to help the students with the contents of their writing

Table 2. The Indicators and Sub-Indicators of Feedback Given by the Teachers

Indicators	Sub-indicators	Teachers						Total	%
		A	B	C	D	E	F		
Form-focused feedback	1. Tense	38	59	62	78	35	50	317	18.18
	2. Word orders	22	26	23	42	25	25	163	9.35
	3. The usage of modals	23	21	25	35	20	25	149	8.54
	4. The usage of nouns	22	29	23	27	20	25	146	8.37
	5. Articles	25	29	34	31	28	28	175	10.03
	6. S-V-agreement	50	54	66	87	56	60	373	21.39
	7. Adjective	12	12	14	20	16	12	86	4.93
	8. Adverb	3	1	2	4	3	2	14	0.80
	9. Prepositions	2	2	5	6	10	3	28	1.61
	10. Pronouns	2	4	5	4	5	7	27	1.55
	11. Writing mechanics	8	5	5	5	6	10	39	2.24
	12. Insertion of words/phrases/sentences	7	15	15	23	19	19	98	5.62
	13. Deletion of words/phrases/sentences	5	5	15	15	10	8	58	3.33
	14. Passive voice	2	10	10	4	10	14	50	2.87
	15. The usage of conjunctions	2	8	4	2	5	8	29	1.66
Content-focused feedback	1. Topic	0	2	0	0	1	0	3	0.17
	2. Main idea	0	2	0	0	1	0	3	0.17
	3. Topic sentence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	4. Details	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	5. Conclusion	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	223	274	308	378	265	296	1744	100

Furthermore, table 2 above shows how the distribution of the written feedback given by the six teachers is. As stated before, most of the written feedback given by the teachers is focused on the forms. It indicates that the written feedback on the S-V agreement is the most dominant by the percentage of 21.39% while the written feedback on the usage of adverbs becomes the least dominant by the percentage of 0.80%.

To see deeply about the provided written feedback items here is one of the samples of the student's writing.
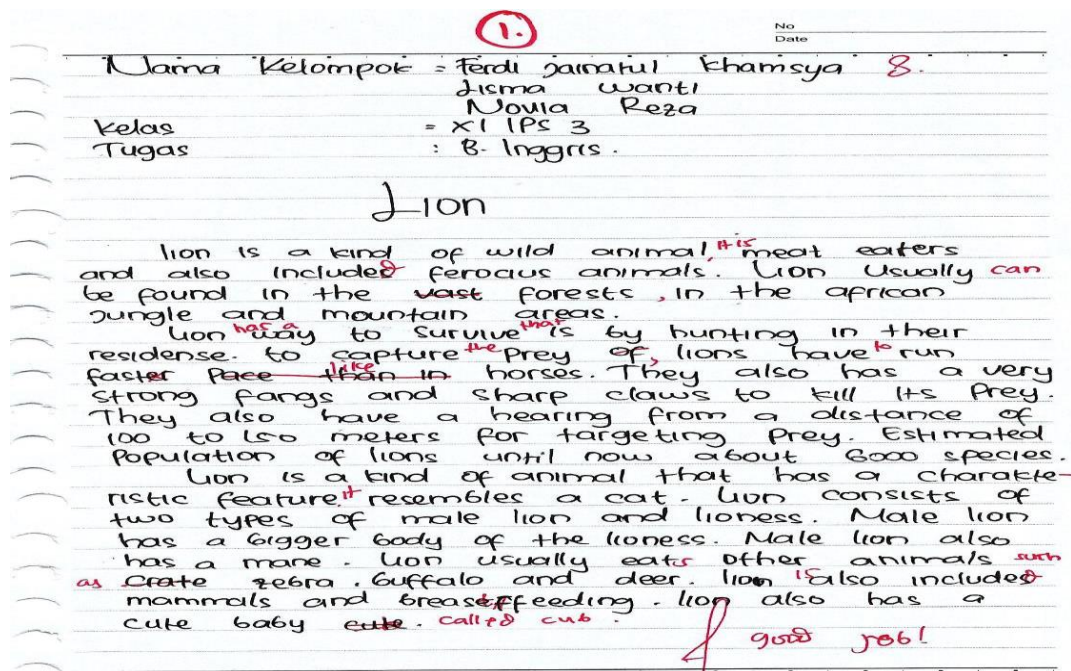
Figure 3. The sample of student's writing

As it is seen in the sample of the writing above, the writing is about an explanation text, which is about the explanation of a lion. The feedback given, it indicates that the teacher only focuses on students' grammar, since all the feedback items help the students in improving their grammar skills. Totally, there are 17 feedback items that are focused on the students' grammar. It can be seen from the first sentence of the first paragraph. In that sentence, the given feedback is about the completeness of a sentence. In that writing, the student only wrote "meat-eaters" and the teacher provided the feedback by adding the subject and verb so that it became a sentence. Then, in the next sentence, the student wrote "Lion usually be found ….". This sentence is grammatically wrong so the teacher gave feedback by adding a modal auxiliary of "can" which was formed in passive voice. The sentence became "Lion usually can be found …". Next, it is still in the first paragraph, and the teacher provided feedback on punctuation. It is shown through this sentence, "Lion usually be found in the vast forest, in the African jungle and mountain areas". In that sentence, the student forgot to write the comma before the places where we can find lions.

Besides, table 2 above also shows a few written feedback items on content that are given by teachers B and E. One of the examples is seen in this sample of writing.
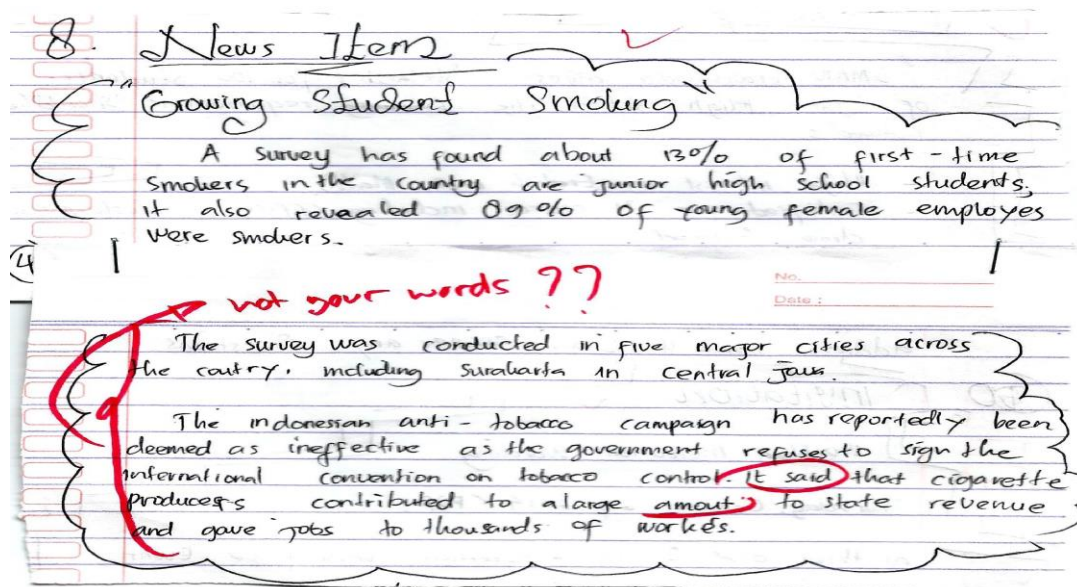

Figure 4. The sample of student's writing

The writing above is a kind of news item text in which the writer informs about the growth of first-time smokers. In those paragraphs, there are three written feedback items provided by the teachers. The first two focus on the form of the writing; meanwhile other one focuses on the content. The written feedback on content questions whether the paragraphs are the writer's own words or not. In other words, it can be said that the teacher does not believe that idea of the paragraphs belongs to the writer.

In addition, the data gained through documentation needed to be clarified by interviewing all of the teachers. The interview also questioned why those teachers focused almost all of their written feedback on the forms of students' writing. Based on the interview, it was found that the teacher gave feedback on the form only since the students were still at the beginning level where most of the materials were about Basic English. Consequently, the teacher put the feedback items to improve the students' basic skills in writing which was about grammar.

In conclusion, it might be said that almost all English teachers at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang provided written feedback that focused on the forms of the students' writing. Besides, the interviews done with all the teachers revealed that each teacher had their own arguments dealing with the focus of the written feedback. Generally, all of the teachers argued that the form-focused written feedback was given since the students were considered beginners in writing. Furthermore, the two teachers, they are B and E provided a few written feedback items on the content. Teacher B stated that the feedback on content was usually done orally, meanwhile, teacher E said that the written feedback on content was not the focus of the feedback since the students needed to work more on forms.

4.1.2. Written Feedback Techniques Used by the Teachers

The table below shows the written feedback techniques used by all the teachers.

Table 3. Written Feedback Techniques Used by All Teachers

Teachers	Written Feedback Techniques and Their Percentage												Total
	TC	%	CC	%	PR	%	SW	%	WC	%	MM	%	
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	221	99.1	2	0.9	223
B	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	267	98.52	4	1.48	271
C	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	308	100	0	0	308
D	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	131	34.66	247	65.34	378
E	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	89	51.15	85	48.85	174
F	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	166	56.08	130	43.92	296
Total									1182	71.64	468	28.36	1650

Note: TC=Tick Charts, CC=Correction Codes, PR=Peer Reviews, SW=Self-Monitored Writing

The table above shows that there are six different written feedback techniques that are commonly used by English teachers. Among those six techniques, all the teachers at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang only apply two of them, they are written commentary and minimal marking techniques. Totally, there are 1650 feedback items given by all teachers. The percentage shows that 71.64 % of the total feedback items are given through the written commentary technique while 28.38 % of them are provided by the minimal marking technique.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1 Focuses on the Written Feedback

Generally, the interview emerged as a major reason that encourages the teachers to focus their written feedback on grammar (form). It was done since most of the students were categorized as beginners in writing. In line with that, Ellis (2008) has stated, "the effectiveness of direct and indirect feedback is likely to depend on the current state of the learners' grammatical knowledge". It means that considering the students' ability is really crucial to

determine what focuses of the given written feedback. It is supported by the idea proposed by Ferris (1999:9). She argues that form-focused feedback cannot be abandoned since students rely heavily on it to improve their grammar in writing. Similarly, Porte (1997) states that unskilled writers have been seen to revise from a narrow outlook and make changes addressing the surface grammatical structure of compositions, usually at the level of words, rather than deeper issues of content and organization. In other words, these two ideas precisely prove that beginner writers or unskilled writers seem to rely much on the feedback that is focused on the forms of writing.

Furthermore, the previous research findings also support this finding that feedback on a form is appropriate to be implemented, especially for students who are considered beginners in writing. Some of them are studies done by Chandler (2003) and Hyland (2003). They showed that teachers' feedback on students' grammatical and lexical errors resulted in a significant improvement in both

accuracy and fluency in subsequent writing of the same type over the same semester. Moreover, research done by Ferris (2006) showed that students made statistically significant reductions in their total number of errors over a semester in five major grammar categories with a particular reduction in the verb and lexical errors. In other words, it can be said that by proving students with corrective written feedback on form, it is expected that there will be changes and improvement in the students' grammar competency which aims to improve the students' writing.

4.2.2 Written Feedback Techniques Applied by the Teachers

The next finding deals with the written feedback techniques applied by the English teachers at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang. It was found that all the teachers there applied two techniques which are known as written commentary and minimal marking technique. Firstly, all of the teachers there applied the written commentary technique in order to respond to their students' writing products. The feedback is given to correct any mistakes by providing the correct versions; it can

be done to improve the students' writing on forms as well as contents. This is in line with O'muircheartaigh (2002) who states that written commentary feedback involves writing detailed comments on the problems that exist in the learners' work. Similarly, Hyland (2003) argues that probably the written commentary technique is the most common type of teacher written feedback which consists of teachers' handwritten commentary on the students' work. These two theories give the general frame that the written commentary technique applied by providing the students with correct forms of the mistakes and letting those feedback items help the students to revise their writing.

In addition, providing such a kind of written feedback technique brings positive inputs toward the students' willingness to revise their writing. It happens since the written commentary technique gives the feedback explicitly in which the correct forms are provided. According to O'muircheartaigh (2002), the idea of the written commentary technique is to guide the students so that they can try to self-correct.

Secondly, another technique which is called minimal marking was also used by English teachers at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang. Here, five teachers combined the techniques; they are the written commentary and minimal marking techniques. The minimal marking technique is usually used to revise the students' errors on forms rather than contents. This is in line with Hyland (2003), who states that minimal marking refers to a type of in-text, form-based feedback, which indicates the location and perhaps the type of error and is more effective in stimulating a student response. Similarly, O'muircheartaigh (2002) states that the minimal marking technique is like correction codes but not as obvious. In other words, the minimal marking technique just gives the students signs of the mistakes they have and lets them work on the signs.

V. CONCLUSION

Here are some points that can be drawn to give conclusions toward the findings.

1. Almost all of the written feedback items given by English teachers at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang focus on the form of students' writing. Kinds of the form are varied; however, the most dominant one is about the written feedback toward the students' mistakes on the S-V agreement, and the least dominant one deals with the written feedback on the usage of adverbs.

2. English teachers at MAN Koto Baru Padang Panjang mainly apply two different techniques, they are written commentary and minimal marking techniques.

3. Some reasons are revealed dealing with the reasons for applying the written feedback techniques. Firstly, the written commentary technique is used because of its effectiveness of that technique for students, especially for students with a low level of proficiency. Besides, the written feedback items delivered through this technique can be used later on as a reference in the next writing activity. Secondly, the minimal marking technique is used since it is effective for teachers, particularly, in the process of giving feedback which is time-saving. In addition, it also helps the students to be critical writers because this technique lets the

students work on the mistakes they have made.

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