
THE LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS OF STUDENTS' COMPETENCE IN WRITING BUSINESS LETTERS

Yuni Eka Pratiwi
Demak Vocational High
School

Dwi Rukmini
Universitas Negeri
Semarang, Indonesia

Abdurrahman Faridi
Universitas Negeri
Semarang, Indonesia

E-mail: yuni.ep66@gmail.com

Received: 30 December 2016. **Revised:** 28 February 2017. **Accepted:** 31 March 2017

Abstract

A good writing not only restates the message or idea using sentences or expressions that are grammatically correct, but also has to organize idea or message in a form which is easy to understand. The aims of this research were 1) to explain the organizations of business letters produced by the twelfth grade students of the office management program of Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational High School; 2) to explain the contents of business letters produced by the students; 3) to explain the grammars of business letters produced by the students; 4) to explain the vocabularies of business letters produced by the students; 5) to explain the mechanics of business letters produced by the students; 6) to explain the writing competence of business letters produced by the students. A qualitative case study was used in this research. The findings derived from students' work. They showed that in the organization of business letters, they can organize the part of letter completely, from the letter head, date, inside address, salutation, give state the purpose, explain the information, conclude and thank to the reader, complementary close, and additional information if necessary. For the content, they got difficulty in what the idea they should write. In grammar, they didn't know the verb form of simple past, confused to use the personal pronoun in English, the structure of sentence, differentiated the auxiliaries, the articles and using degree of comparison. For vocabulary, they got difficulties in using and choosing vocabulary. In the mechanic, they made mistakes in using spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The findings of the students' competencies in writing business letters, there were 75.00% students who were competent in writing business letters, almost of them mastered the organization, mechanic, and the content of letters. 25.00% students who had no-competent, they still got difficulty in using grammar and choose the vocabulary. Almost half students in the class passed the exam. It can be concluded that the twelfth grade students of the office management program of Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational High School are competent in writing business letters.

Keywords: Linguistic, Writing, Business letters.

How to Cite: Yuni Eka Pratiwi; Dwi Rukmini; Abdurrahman Faridi. 2017. The Linguistic Problems of Students' Competence in Writing Business Letters. *Language Circle: Journal of Language and Literature*, XI/2.

INTRODUCTION

In learning English, there are four language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Writing is one of the language skills which are important in our life. Through writing, we can inform others, carry out transactions, persuade, infuriate, and tell what we feel. However, we know that writing or learning to write especially in a second language is not simply. It is one of the four basic skills that are very complex and difficult to learn. So for the beginner writers whose mother tongue is not English, it is the most difficult English skill.

Writing is an integrative skill and an important, constructive, and a complex process. It is an essential skill in foreign language learning in order to give the learners the opportunity to develop the proficiency they need to write personal letters, essays, research papers and journals. In addition, writing skills enhance cognitive and linguistic awareness (Abu-Jalil 2001).

A good writing does not only restate the message or idea using sentences or expressions that are grammatically correct, but also has to organize idea or message in a form which is easy to understand. The idea or message must be constructed in a text form that has purposed, rhetorical structure, and linguistic realization or grammatical pattern. It must be created effectively in one form of written text.

Furthermore, there are students' common problems in writing. According to Al-Buainain (2009:4) there are nine defects in students' writing, such as 1) high frequency of grammatical errors, 2) lack of variety in grammatical structure employed, 3) use of inappropriate vocabulary, 4) use of inappropriate grammatical structure, 5)

limited range of vocabulary, 6) poor spelling, 7) inadequate understanding of the topic, 8) deficiency in clear self-experience, 9) poor punctuation.

In my observation as an English teacher in Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational High School, I found that the most of the students got difficulties in writing English. Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational High School is a foundation and religious boarding school located in Mranggen, Demak. The foundation starts from play group until senior high school and vocational school. In Ky Ageng Giri Vocational High School, there are automotive, multimedia, office management and garment as the programs. Especially in office management program, the students are taught many kinds of business letters. According to Bly (2004) there are many kinds of business letters, they are sale letter, a letter of inquiry, request letter, order letter, invitation letter, offer letter, application letter, letter of recommendation, thank letter, and etc. Some of them are taught in the vocational high schools. According to my observation students' score in writing business letters assignments started from tenth grades until twelfth grades, almost of them got bad score in writing a letter of sell, a letter of inquiry, a letter of order, a letter of offer, a letter of complaint and application letter. Therefore I want to know their obstacles in writing business letters. Writing business letters are very important for them, because the headmaster asked the students in the end of semester or in practice examination they have to produce a letter. So writing business letters are very important for them, because it is as the product of writing skill in practice examination

In my teaching and learning process, I found that most of students get difficulties in

writing. For example: grammatical errors, the use of inappropriate vocabulary and mechanics.

In evaluating the students' writing assignment is important to check how far the students' writing performance improves. In evaluating writing, it is needed to consider the objective or the criterion of the materials. Each objective can be achieved through the writing assignment given.

In this study I use a qualitative case study to analyze the students' problems in writing business letters. From those problems, I want to know the students' competence in writing business letters. The analysis is based on the sentences make by the students. From this result will be used to know the lacks which probably occur in teaching writing such as the material, the teaching method or the students themselves which is lack of understanding in vocabulary, grammar, mechanic, and etcetera in doing writing.

Regarding to the important of writing business letters for the twelfth grade students but they still have difficulties in writing, I intended to conduct this research to know the students' competence in writing business letters. After knowing how far their competence in writing business letters, they can give me feedback in teaching writing. I can make or use the best method in teaching writing business letters start from tenth grades, so that in the twelfth grade when doing practice examination they can produce

good product in writing business letters and also get good score in the end.

According to Brown (2004) there are some aspects difficulties in writing, they are organization, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. From those problems, I conclude that the students can learn writing easier if they could mastery of organize their idea, mastery of vocabulary, and mastery of grammar.

Talking about writing in Vocational High School, there is relevant matter that needs to be highlighted. It is the regulation of ministry of education in the form of content standard of Vocational High School students.

According to the content standard which is developed by BSNP (2006), the English teaching of Vocational High School in Indonesia is aimed at making the students develop several competences. They are 1) developing students' oral and written competence to achieve the informational competence which makes it possible for the students to access various knowledge 2) developing students' awareness of the importance of English in improving Indonesia's competence at the world's level 3) developing students' understanding on the relationship between cultures and language.

Moreover, according to the regulation of ministry of national education, the standard of competence and basic competence for Vocational High Schools' grade XII semester 6 is that they have to perform several writing competencies as shown in the Table 1.

Table 1
Standard Competence and Basic Competence of Writing Skill for Vocational High School Students Grade XII Semester 6

Standard Competence	Basic Competence
3.5 Understanding kind of simple business letters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business documents: business letters, faxes, memos, advertisements, brochures, forms, questionnaires, etc.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant vocabulary • Antonym/synonym Affixes: prefixes/suffixes
--	---

The table above shows that the twelfth grade students will learn kinds of simple business letters. In the syllabus of the twelfth grade, there doesn't explain what kind of business letters which should be taught. But, according to the handbook and the productive teacher, there are some business letters which should be taught for example a letters of sell, a letter of inquiry, a letter of offer, a letter of order, a letter of complaint, and application letter). However, in this research study, I will assess students' writing business letters.

There are some parts in writing business letter according to Carey (2002: 9). The first is Letterhead or Heading, second is Date, third is File Number (optional), fourth is Confidential (optional), fifth is Inside Address, sixth is Attention Line (optional), seventh is Salutation (optional), eighth is Subject Line (optional), ninth is Body of the Letter, tenth is Complimentary Close (optional enjoy doing.

The important of writing assessment is planning activity which is to help students develop their writing skills. It is invaluable to both students, who can learn from their errors, and teachers, who can check the students' progress and identify specific problems. However, correcting written work is usually a time-consuming activity which teachers do not particularly

There are some techniques which are helpful for teacher in assessing writing work, they are: the first, Mark positively. The teacher's corrections should not have a discouraging effect on students, so instead of deducting points for each mistake they have, we could respond positively to their strengths

and reward them with what they have got right.

The second technique is designing a specific and reliable correction system. Thus we need to decide: (a) What aspects of writing will be taken into account (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc.), (b) What type of descriptors will be used (numbers, letters, words such as 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', etc.), (c) What criteria will be established to understand what each descriptor represents. These criteria could be arranged in holistic scales or analytic scales, which separate the aspects of writing into different units.

Third is mark selectively. When finding a lot of mistakes in a composition, it is a good idea, especially when carrying out informal assessment to focus the attention on some particular aspects, such as basic grammatical mistakes or organization, and ignore the rest, otherwise students will see their page painted in red and feel discouraged. The mistakes can be avoided in another time.

Fourth is using a clear correction code. In order to give feedback to students, teachers could create a system of abbreviations which they write in the margins of the composition to indicate the type of error detected, so that students can try to identify and correct them themselves later on in class. Some correction symbols could be the following: Sp = spelling mistake, T = wrong tense, Wo = word order, Pr = preposition, L = linking, V = vocabulary (inappropriate language), P = punctuation, = a word missing ? = unclear meaning, Pa = paragraph, and etc.

If the teachers want to assess the students' writing skills formally, they have to include

some writing activities in a test, they should think of the writing activities they have been doing in class and choose the right ones. In this research, I use analytic scale by Brown (2004) for rating the students' writing business letter and use code if necessity.

On the teaching of writing, an evaluation should be done to measure or to know the students' ability in writing. The effectiveness of a learning process of writing skill can be measured through an evaluation activity. According to Brown (2004) there are two scoring systems of writing tests, analytic system and holistic system.

According to Brown (2004: 244-245) covers some points for rating compositions tasks in analytic scale, there are organization, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanic.

To know the students competence/no-competence or passed/failed in their study, it can be seen from the standard score. Minimum standard score is used as the reference to evaluate the students are competence or not in the subject of the study. Each subjects' school has different minimum standard score. In Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, the minimum standard score of English subject is 70.

The pre-specify standard of performance test on a numerical point system called absolute system of grading (Brown 2004:286). For example, having established points for midterm test, points for final exam, and point for accumulated for the semester. The key to make an absolute grading system work is to be painstakingly clear on competencies and objectives and on tests, task and other assessment techniques that will figure into the formula for assigning a grade.

There are also some criteria for judging or to know writing competence in writing work. In *Writing Competency Assessment: Summary Report for 2009-2014* journal, there are some

grades on essay or writing work range from A to F. The grade pass starts from A-C, not pass starts from D-E.

For pass grade, **A A A** paper is rated SUPERIOR and shows originality of ideas and control of coherence, unity, development, and flow. A controlling main idea is readily apparent and is supported well with clearly developed examples and details. Paragraphs are structured well and include a variety of sentence structures and the use of transitions. Sentences show a superior command of word choice appropriate for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. There are very few minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

B A B paper is rated ABOVE AVERAGE and has an interesting topic with an obvious structure or plan but lacks full competency in coherence, unity, development, and/or flow. A controlling main idea is apparent and is supported with examples and details. Paragraphs are structured well and include some sentence variety and transitions. Sentences show a command of appropriate word choice for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are usually appropriate with very few major or minor errors.

C A C paper is rated AVERAGE and has a clear topic but lacks originality and full competency in coherence, unity, development, and flow. A controlling main idea is used but lacks some necessary supporting details and examples. Paragraphs show some structure but may not use a variety of sentence styles or structures. Some transitions are used but may not be appropriate for content. Sentences show a limited command of appropriate word choice for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. The paper may have a few major errors

or frequent minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

For not pass grades, **D A D** paper is rated WEAK and has a poorly defined central idea that shows little insight and/or lacks full competency in coherence, unity, development, and/or flow. Sentences are sometimes unrelated to the main idea and give only limited supporting details and examples. Transitions are present but most are lacking or inappropriately used. Sentence structure is frequently correct; however, sentence style and patterns are usually repetitive forms. Word choice is often inconsistent, incorrect, and inappropriate for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. Major and distracting minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling are obvious.

F An **F** paper is VERY WEAK and may have no clear main idea. Sentences do not support a main idea and do not provide specific details or examples. Sentences are faulty in style and not readable in parts. Transitions and sentence variety are quite limited or unused. There are frequent serious errors and excessive minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

0 A **ZERO** paper is rated UNACCEPTABLE and does not follow the framework or address the topic given. This score is also given to those papers that deliberately use explicit language that attacks the assignment or topic. It is also frequently given to plagiarized papers.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted this present research using a qualitative case study. The subjects of this research were the twelfth graders of Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational High School. The twelfth graders of that school consist of four classes. I took one of those classes as my subjects of this research

that was “office management program” class. Since the business letter was important, I used it as the source of the data. There were thirty three students of office management program. I divided them into six groups. Each group consisted of six or five persons. I gave the topic to the group randomly. If the students took the lottery by themselves, there would be many students who got the same topics. Group one wrote a letter of sell, group two wrote inquiry letter, group three wrote a letter of offer, group four wrote a letter of order, group five wrote a letter of complaint, and group six wrote application letter. The twelfth graders’ business letters writings of the Office Management Program of Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational School were the source of the data. The instrument of data collection used in this study was test of writing business letters. The documents were used to obtain the data about the students’ competencies in writing business letters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, I discuss the theoretical implications based on the findings of the study that I have presented in the previous section to answer research problems of this study. Hence, this section was divided into six parts based on the objectives of the study.

The organizations of students’ business letters

The organizations in students’ business letters were presented in some aspects; they were letter head, date, inside address, salutation, state the purpose, explain the information, conclude and thank to the reader, complementary close, and additional information. Observing the percentages of organization aspects (see Appendix 2, page 82), the dominant aspect of organization was

the letters' part of organization which was almost complete. There were letter head, date, inside address, salutation, explain the information, conclude and thank to the reader, complementary close that got 45.83%. Then it was followed by the part of organization which was complete, there were letter head, date, inside address, salutation, state the purpose, explain the information, conclude and-thank to the reader, complementary close, and additional information in 33.33%, and the part of organization which was not complete, there were just letter head, date, salutation, explain the information, complementary close in 20.83%. There were no students who wrote the letter in the part of organization which was not complete, there were just, date, salutation, explain the information, complementary close.

The Content of Students' Business Letters

There were two aspects in analyzing the content; they were idea and content of the letters. Based on the findings (see Appendix 3, page 83) the dominant in analyzing the content in writing business letters was the idea completed and clear idea and the content that was almost related to the idea in 62.5%. It showed that the students could write the business letters based on the types of business letters which the idea and the content were appropriate with the letter's types. There were 29.2% who could write the business letters which the complete and clear idea and the content which was related to the idea. It meant that only 29.2% students could write in good idea and content based on the letter's types. And then there were 8.3% students who wrote the business letters in completed and clear idea but the content was not related to the idea. There were no students who wrote the business letters in unclear idea and the content which was not related to the idea.

The Grammar of Students' Business Letters

There were preposition, modal, article, verb forms and tense sequence aspects in analyzing grammar. The finding can be seen in the Appendix 4 page 84. Based on the finding the dominant in analyzing the grammar in writing business letters, there were 83.3% who made numerous grammatical errors. It showed that only few students who had less understanding in grammar aspects, such as preposition, modal, article, verb forms and tense sequence. There were 12.5% students who had very few grammatical errors. It meant that those students had very good understanding grammar aspects in writing, especially writing business letters. And then there were 4.1% who made few grammatical errors but do not affect the meaning. And there were no students who made frequent grammatical errors.

The Vocabulary of Students' Business Letters

In analyzing the vocabulary, I analyzed the effective choice of words, the word forms and the meaning of the sentence. The analyzing vocabularies used by the students could be seen in the Appendix 5 page 85. The table displayed that the dominant in vocabulary used by students in writing business letters. They had few misuses of vocabularies, word form but not change the meaning in 75%. It meant that they were good enough in using and choosing the vocabularies in writing business letters. There were only 25% students who made limited range confusing words and word form. There were no students who had effective choice of words and word form and also very poor knowledge of words, word form and not understandable. They were in 0%.

The Mechanics of Students' Business Letters

In analyzing the mechanic of writing business letters, there were some aspects which I analyzed; there were spelling, punctuation and capitalization. From the findings (see Appendix 6, page 86), it showed that there were not correct spelling, punctuation and capitalization and serious problem of errors in spelling, punctuation and capitalization, they were in 0%. The dominant in mechanic writing of business letters was the students made occasional errors of spelling, punctuation and capitalization in 48.3%. It showed that in writing business letters they had good writing mechanics. It followed by 54.2% in frequently errors of spelling, punctuation and capitalization.

The students' business letters analysis

To know the students passed or failed in their study it can be seen from the minimum standard score. Each school subjects has different minimum standard score. In Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, the minimum standard score of English subject is 70. From the final score of writing business letters (see Appendix 8, page 88), it showed that there were 79.17% students who passed the writing business letters exams and only 20.83% who failed.

In absolute grading scale according to Brown (2004:287), writing business letters examination belonged to final exams, because it was the product of writing skill English subject in twelfth grade practice examination. The students who got A was only 4.16%, B was 29.17%, C was 45.83%, D was 20.83%, and F was 0.00%.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sets out to explain how the organizations of business letters produced by the twelfth graders of the office management program of Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational High School, how the contents of business letters produced by the students, how the grammars of business letters produced by the students, how the vocabularies of business letters produced by the students, how the mechanics of business letters produced by the students, and how the writing competencies of business letters produced by the students.

The findings show that students are competent in organizing the part of letter. They can organize the part of letter completely, from the letter head, date, inside address, salutation, give state the purpose, explain the information, conclude and thank to the reader, complementary close, and additional information if necessary.

Referring to the finding in the content in writing business letters, there are some students who get difficulty in writing the idea. Some of them confuse in differentiating the letter types. The contents in the students' works are not appropriate with the letter types.

Based on the grammar in writing business letters, most of students get difficulty in using grammar. They don't know the verb form of the simple past. They also confuse to use the personal pronoun in English. The structure of their sentence is also not appropriate with the structure in English sentence. Sometimes there is no verb or auxiliary in the sentence. They also get difficulty in differentiating the auxiliaries, the articles and using degree of comparison.

In the vocabulary findings, they get difficulty in using and choosing it. Some of them confused to use the appropriate

vocabulary for the letters; it makes incorrect meaning of the sentence.

Regarding to the finding of mechanic in writing business letters, they often make mistake in using it. Some of them make mistakes in using spelling, punctuation, and capitalization

The findings of the students' competencies in writing business letters, shows that there are 75.00% students who passed or competent in writing business letters, almost all of them mastered the organization, mechanic, and the content of letters. There are only 25.00% students who are no-competent; they still get difficulty in using grammar and choosing the vocabulary. Almost half students in the class passed the exam. It can be concluded that the twelfth graders of the office management program of Ky Ageng Giri Mranggen, Demak Vocational High School are competent in writing business letters.

Suggestions are given based on the conclusions above. Firstly, the students should be aware the importance of writing skill especially writing business letters. They should increase their motivation to learn basic writing in English, so that they are able to write English correctly. They should learn more the grammar especially tenses and vocabularies in English. They should be aware in writing mechanics, and they should be able to minimize those writing aspects in writing business letters.

Secondly, For English teachers, they have to give great attention to the fact that writing business letters in English is not easy; they should push the students in writing since tenth-grade; they need to encourage the students' grammar in English; they should encourage the students vocabularies in English; they should give correction directly when the students got wrong mechanics in writing; they should help their students to overcome those problems by having friendly, helpful and cooperative behaviors to make students comfortable when writing English especially in writing business letters; they should remind the students not to worry about making mistakes and give them clear instructions and sufficient guidance; give the students motivation that writing business letters is the product of writing skill in practice examination, so they have to pay more attention in studying business letters.

Lastly, the next researcher is expected that to know the students' competencies in writing especially writing business letter, it can be used business letters such as application letters, a letter of sell, a letter of inquiry, a letter of offer, a letter of order, a letter of complaint, and an application letter or other business letters. The analysis can be in the organization, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanic in aspects of analysis.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Jalil A. (2001). An Investigation of the Strategies of Teaching Writing for Ninth Graders in Irbid Schools. M. A. Thesis, Unpublished. Amman: University of Jordan.
- Al-Buainan, H. (2009). Students' Writing Error in EFL: A Case Study. *Journal of Faculty of Education*, 19 (1): 311-351.
- Bly, Robert W. (2004). Webster's New World™ Letter Writing Handbook. Indianapolis, Indiana: Wiley Publishing, Inc.
- Brown, HD. (2004). *Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices*. New York: Pearson Education, inc.
- Carey, John A. (2002). *Business Letters for Busy People* (4th ed.). U.S.A. : National Press Publications, a division of Rockhurst College Continuing Education Center, Inc.
- Gilling, Desmond A. (2013). *The Essential Handbook For Business Writing*. Canada: Greenlink Consulting.
- Harmer, Jeremy. (2004). *How to Teach Writing*. Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Education Limited, Longman.
- Harmer, Jeremy. (2007). *How to Teach English, An Introduction to the Practice of English Language Teaching*. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Jarvis, D. (2000). The Process Writing Method. *TESL Journal*, vol. 8, no. 7, July.
- Javed M, et al. (2013). A Study of Students' Assessment in Writing Skills of the English Language. *International Journal of Instruction* www.e-iji.net.