Writing Strategies Used by English Department Students with Different Self-Esteem Level to Revise Their Essay(s)

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigated writing strategies used by English Department students with different self-esteem levels to revise their essay(s). This study involved six third-year students of the English Language Teaching study program at Universitas Negeri Malang. They have different self-esteem levels (3 students with high self-esteem and 3 students with moderate self-esteem levels). There were three types of writing strategies that the students with varying levels of self-esteem used to revise their essay(s): monitoring, getting feedback, and revising. Those strategies were considered helpful for the students to improve the quality of their essay(s).


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Writing is a thinking process of producing ideas and messages, delivering them through sentences and paragraphs, and organize them thus it can be easily understood by the readers (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 2003). It can be done using different styles of language (Jalaluddin, 2011). A writer must have a purpose(s) when he decides to write a text. The purpose of the text then make the writer decide what type of text he will use and it will eventually influence the language the writer uses to make the text. The text can be in the form of an expository writing which focuses on communicating information from the writer to the readers. The descriptive text focuses on illustrating an object, a person, or a place in words thus the readers can imagine what it looks like. Persuasive text focuses on making the readers do something or believe in an attitude or a belief that usually contains the writer’s opinion. The narrative text focuses on making and communicating stories with characters, problems, settings, or the combination of those styles.

Compared to speaking, delivering ideas/messages in writing can probably be more complicated since the writers do not have a direct communication with the readers. Therefore, the ideas/messages should be delivered very clearly in order to make the readers understand them. For students, writing is a skill that should be mastered since it can be used as a determinant of their success in learning language. Even though some students prefer writing to speaking, writing can never be seen as a skill that the readers understand. Therefore, revising is usually about the re-reading and re-writing of the texts, while editing tends to focus on the writers’ grammatical accuracy and writing style. Publishing as the final stage of writing where the writer shares the text thus it can be read by a lot of people – in case of an EFL classroom, students can present their text in front of the class or stick it on the wall magazine that is probably provided in the classroom. In
revising stage, students can modify their draft thus, it can be a better one (Silva & Almeida, 2016). The modification could be about correcting grammatical mistakes, adding, eliminating, and replacing ideas. This process is crucial in writing (O’Neill & Gravois, 2017) because it could improve the quality of the text(s) students are writing. Revising can also help students become aware of the things they write and the problems they face during writing (Denscombe & Robins, 1980). Even though revising seems to be ‘last’ stage of writing – before publishing it, (Sommers, 1980) argues that revision can be conducted throughout the process of writing, following the changes of writers’ intention during the process.

However, despite being necessary and beneficial in developing students’ writing skills, revision still seems to be difficult to be conducted by the students because of some reasons. The first reason is there is a possibility that learners do not know what to revise. According to Musgrove (2006), there are 3 (three) reasons for learners making mistakes in their writings; it can be because ‘they do not care, they do not know, or they do not see it’. Learners may be able to revise and correct that ungrammatical sentences in their writing by using their prior knowledge about grammar. However, it may be difficult for them to revise the way they develop and organize their ideas since they may think that the way they deliver their ideas is the best way they can do. Knowing the content of their texts can also hinder students from identifying problems in their readers (Hayes & Flower, 1986). As students write their text, they must have read some resources related to the topic of their text even before deciding to write it. The information they obtained can make them feel that the things they write in their text have been clear enough for the readers to understand since they can understand the ideas/messages of the text when they read it. Another reason is that some students do not think they can revise their essay because they cannot do it.

Self-esteem is someone’s belief in his abilities and values that makes him accept or like himself (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). This personality trait helps a person to have confidence and a positive mindset in facing life and any challenges given to him. While according to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is a person’s general positive assessment of themselves. This assessment process can produce two possible results: positive or negative judgment on the person himself. This judgment will eventually influence the person’s motivation, effort, and achievement (M. Rosenberg, 1965). The favorable decision will build one’s confidence and motivation, naturally giving him the spirit to give his best effort to achieve what he thinks he deserves. On the other hand, the negative judgment will make someone lose his confidence and demotivate them to give his best effort since they think probably do not deserve what they actually can get.

According to (J. D. Brown & Marshall, 2013), there are 3 (three) types of self-esteem. Those are global self-esteem (trait self-esteem), state self-esteem (feeling of self-worth), and domain-specific self-esteem (self-evaluations). Global self-esteem is someone’s general opinions on himself. The opinions are usually stable unless there is a certain situation that happens to the person. State self-esteem is someone’s opinion on himself at a certain point (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). It may change depending on the person’s situation (e.g. it can be high when the person got married, but it can be low when the person had a hard time). Domain specific self-esteem is someone’s beliefs in his own values and abilities. It can be seen from the way that person accounts his own performance in doing assignments or any activities.

People with high self-esteem will be recognized easily since they tend to be independent, think positively, confident, responsible, and like to take challenges (Clemes and Bean, 2001:334). People in this category usually have positivism that makes them able to think that every task given to them is a challenge and a chance for them to improve their ability. On the other hand, (Morris Rosenberg & Owens, 2009) describes people with low self-esteem levels as hypersensitive, timid, negative, uncertain, lonely, and exiled. People who have low self-esteem tend to think that every task given to them is a burden since they do not think they cannot finish it well. Some aspects can influence the growth of someone’s self-esteem level. Those aspects can come from one’s inner-self and/or the environment surrounding him. The growth of self-esteem level can be influenced by parents’ treatment that is appropriate with the person’s age and the way they allow him to take part in the society, school problems, how other people see and/or think about disability, and living in medium-sized town (i.e. population 10,000-49,999) (Wolman & Basco, 1994). Students’ self-esteem in their writing skill is one of the crucial aspects to determine their success in writing because self-esteem can give both direct and indirect influence to students’ behavior (Klassen & Usher, 2010). High level of self-esteem can develop student’s motivation in writing because by believing that they can accomplish the writing tasks given to them, students will feel encouraged and motivated to do the task, thus they will put their best effort to finish the task so that they can get better, or even the best academic achievement in writing. Furthermore, there is evidence that shows the correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement. Based on a study conducted by Hassan (2001), students who have higher self-esteem produce better quality texts than students who have low self-esteem levels. The result turns out to be like that because students with higher self-esteem levels in writing have lower writing apprehension that can hinder them.

The way students revise their essays can be different from the way experienced writers do. Students tend to revise their essay by re-reading it to find if there are mistakes in their essay, and then correct it. They also sometimes change the content of their essay when they have new ideas they want to write. These actions students do to revise their essay can be called as writing strategies. Writing strategy is any activities that the students do to make text (Manchon, De Larios and Murphy, 2007, p. 231). Writing strategy can be seen as an important factor to make teaching writing successful since it represents the things the students really do during the writing process (Davoudi et al., 2015). Writing strategy can facilitate students to make good texts because it also includes the media and/or sources students use while writing (e.g. dictionaries, audio/video, references, etc.). (Mu, 2005) had classified 30 (thirty) ESL writing strategies into 5 (five) categories. Those categories were used to make more specific classification on writing strategies. Those categories are (1) rhetorical strategies, (2) metacognitive strategies, (3) cognitive
strategies, (4) communicative strategies, and (5) social/affective strategies. Those writing strategies can be implemented throughout the process of writing – from planning to revising. Rhetorical strategies are the writing strategies that are related to the way the students use to arrange and deliver their ideas thus the text they make can be acceptable to the native speakers of the language. This category consists of 4 (four) sub-strategies, those are organization – how the students arrange the text they make, use of L1 – using first language to deliver the ideas then translating it into the target language, formatting/modelling – deciding the appropriate genre for the text, and comparing – comparing the way of writing in L1 with the way of writing in target language.

Meta-cognitive strategies are related to the way students plan their learning, think of how it will go, monitor it, and evaluate their progress (EHRMAN & OXFORD, 1990). It consists of 3 (three) sub-strategies: planning – discovering the main point of the text that will be written, monitoring – examining the process of writing to find if there are problems in it, and evaluating – assessing the quality of the text that has been written.

Cognitive strategies are ‘sets of mental processes that are consciously implemented to regulate thought processes and content in order to achieve goals or solve problems’ (Cameron & Jago, 2013). It consists of generating ideas – creating new ideas, revising – modifying the prior ideas and/or the text, elaborating – enriching the contents of the text, clarification – giving explanation of what is written, retrieval – recalling the information that had already been known, rehearsing – checking if the ideas or language can be used in the text, and summarizing – combining information from some sources to make a point.

Communicative strategies are the strategies that are related to the way students deliver their ideas interactively thus, the readers can understand the content of the text. It consists of avoidance, reduction – excluding words and/or grammatical structure that the writer does not really understand while writing, (Elyildirim, 2017), and sense of readers – placing the writer her/himself in the reader position.

Social or affective strategies are the strategies that are related to the students’ feelings, communication with other people, and access to the available resources (Mu, 2005). It includes resourcing – using dictionaries, books, etc. as the references, getting feedback – asking for advices from their peers, professor, etc., assigning goals – deciding what to achieve through the writing (e.g. becoming a better writer), and rest/deferral - taking a break or doing something fun to make them feel more comfortable in writing.

In EFL classroom, some strategies can be used by students. The strategies can be different from the strategies used by the professional writers since students are still learning to use the language. According to Wahyuni (2015), the strategies that students can use to improve the quality of their essay(s) are by using different types of dictionaries to have a broader knowledge related to the proper word or diction that should be used while writing about a certain topic. In order to improve the language structure or the grammatical accuracy used in the text, students can ask their peers to read their text. Students can also use content-mapping in order to guide them develop the content ideas of their text. This study purposed to answer the following question: 1) what writing strategies do students with different self-esteem levels revise their essays?

METHOD

This study is qualitative case study that purposed to investigate the writing strategies used by English Department students with different self-esteem level to revise their essay. This study took place at Univeritas Negeri Malang. 6 (Six) third-year students (5 female students and 1 male student) were selected purposively by administering an adapted version of Self-Esteem Scale (from Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (M. Rosenberg, 1965), Prickle’s Writing Self-Efficacy Scale (1994), and Heatherton and Polivy’s State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The selected students then were categorized into students with high self-esteem level (S1, S2, and S3) and students with moderate self-esteem level (S4, S5, and S6). The students then were asked to write a short argumentative essay to facilitate them retrieving the writing strategies they used while writing their essay. The students were later interviewed using a semi-structured guide to obtain information related to the writing strategies they used to revise their essay(s).

RESULT

Writing Strategies Used by Students with High Self-Esteem Level to Revise Their Essay(s)

All the three students who belonged in the category of high self-esteem level mentioned that they would re-read their essay(s) after it was finished to find if there were the problem(s) in it (metacognitive strategies’ monitoring). The students also said they would edit or correct their essay(s) when they found ungrammatical sentences or other things that they thought they should pay more attention to (cognitive strategies’ revising). The students were asked what became their focus while reading their essay draft and two students said that they usually focused on the grammatical correctness of the sentences they had written in the essay(s). When they were asked if they would also give attention to the content of the essay, both of them stated that they did not really pay attention to the content of their essay.

S3: ‘usually revised and edited my essay(s) while writing the draft so that I was quite sure that the sentences were grammatically correct, I frequently re-read my essay for several times before submitting it to the lecturer. I tended to focus on my grammar rather than the content of my essay since the main point was usually on the grammar while the content of the essay was not considered.’
S2: ‘I usually re-read my draft to make sure that everything was correctly made. I tended to focus on grammatical correctness because I thought that it influenced the message(s) I wanted to deliver. When I found something that I thought still needed more attention, I would write that part on a new blank page, re-read it again, and made a change on it if I thought I had to.’

While another student said that she re-read her essay by focusing on both content and grammar since she thought those two aspects were important in writing.

S1: ‘When reviewing my essay, I focused on my essay content and the language structure I used in it. It is because both aspects were important. Then, I made corrections to what I wrote. However, I rarely did that since I had reviewed and edited my essay since I was still writing the draft.’

All the three students further said that they also asked for help from another person to read their essay draft(s) and give her/his comments on it. Two students mentioned that they asked one of their friends to read their essay draft (affective strategies’ getting feedback).

S1: ‘I did ask for help from a friend to read my essay as the lecturer directed us to do it, although I preferred to not show my essay to them. I got some feedback from them, but I would only follow it if I thought it was necessary.

S3: ‘I asked my friend to read my essay. After that, I usually got feedbacks related to my grammar. And listening to their feedback, I did not feel anything bad about it.

S2: ‘Besides re-reading my essay draft after finishing it, I would ask a friend of mine to read my essay draft as my lecturer always asked her students to exchange our draft with each other’s. Moreover, I’d like to get feedback from another perspective to make my essay better.’

Writing strategies used by students with moderate self-esteem level to revise their essay(s)

Between the three students who had moderate self-esteem, only one student said that she usually re-read her essay draft after finishing it. She would try to find if things in her essay need to be corrected and changed (metacognitive strategies’ monitoring).

S6: ‘I read my essay after I finished writing them to check whether or not there were things that required modification.’

The other two students otherwise did not re-read their draft. One student claimed that it would not be helpful for her to re-read her draft since even if there were mistakes, she would not be able to find them. While the other student revealed that he would directly submit his essay draft after finishing it without having any intention of re-reading it.

S5: ‘I rarely read the essay I had written because I didn’t think I could identify my own mistakes. When I made mistakes while writing, it was usually because I did not know how the correct one should be.’

S4: ‘Once I finished my argumentative essays, I would directly submit my essay. I did not want to bother re-read it again.’

However, all the three students with moderate self-esteem levels agreed that they did ask for help from other people in revising their draft. They would ask their friends to read their drafts to get their feedback or consult with the lecturer (affective strategies’ getting feedback).

S5: ‘I usually asked a friend of mine to read my essay draft and asked her/his opinions about it.’

S6: ‘I asked a friend to read my work thus I could make a more objective assessment.’

S4: ‘When I thought that I needed help, I would ask for help from my friend or the lecturer to read and give feedback regarding my essay draft.’

The students then explained that when they found mistakes and problems, either after re-reading the draft or asking their friend to read their draft, they would correct and modify their draft thus, it could be a better essay (cognitive strategies: revising).

DISCUSSION

Out of the six students interviewed, four students (S1, S2, S3 who had high self-esteem level and S6 who had moderate self-esteem level) said that they would re-read their essay to check if there were problems. Most of them said they focused on grammar more than the content of their paper since the lecturer tended to concentrate on grammar more than the content while giving feedback to the students. However, one student said that she focused on both her grammar and the content of the essay since she believed that those two aspects were essential to make a good essay. Then when they found mistakes in their paper, e.g. mismatch of sentence agreement or the ideas that they thought should be modified, they would correct it. These students did this self-monitoring strategy because they realized that it was an effective strategy to improve the quality of their essays as their teachers and lecturers suggested they do it.

Self-monitoring and self-directed revision that the students did was a helpful strategy to improve their writing skills. It can grow the students’ independence in learning writing (Cresswell, 2000), even though the students could focus on the language more than the content and the organization of the writing. Charles as cited by (Xiang, 2004) wrote that self-monitoring ‘makes it easy for students to express uncertainty about any part of their text, and to receive direct answers to their queries’, and motivates the students to consider their writing more thoroughly and carefully, and to put themselves into the readers’ shoes. Moreover,
self-directed revision is an ability that EFL learners should master since it can help them improve their writing ability and not depend on the feedback given by other people. Moreover, the person who really understands the writing a learner writes is the learner herself/himself. Therefore, it will give a better result when the learner can revise her/his own writing.

Five students further mentioned that they tend to focus on grammatical errors when re-reading their essay draft. The students’ statement supported Silva’s (195) statement, as cited by (Kietlinska, 2006) that ‘ESL students focus more on grammar and less on mechanics and spelling’. However, the students also stated that they would change the content of their essay – either partially or the whole draft when they had new ideas related to the essay’s content as they still read more resources while writing. Therefore, even though the students focused only on the grammar in the revising stage, the students actually had started revising their essay, both the grammar and the content even since they wrote the essay.

On the other side, two students – S4 and S5, who belonged in the group of moderate self-esteem level stated that they preferred to not re-read their essay. S5 said that even if there were mistakes in her essay, it usually because she really did not know about it and that she usually thought that her essay had been well and correctly made. While S4 said that he did not re-read his essay because he did not want to bother doing it. However, after the researcher looked into their response to the Self-Esteem Scale, they found that they were not confident in finding their own writing errors. This kind of feeling can hinder the students from being aware of their own mistakes in writing essays. They only focused on delivering their ideas without having deeper consideration on the content of the essay and/or the language used.

According to Musgrove (2006), there are three reasons for learners making mistakes in their writings; it can be because ‘they do not care, they do not know, or they do not see it’. Learners may be able to revise and correct that ungrammatical sentences in their writing by using their prior knowledge about grammar. However, it may be difficult for them to revise the way they develop and organize their ideas since they may think that the way they deliver their ideas is the best way they can do. Moreover, suppose the learners do not have good proficiency in English. In that case, it will be more difficult for them to revise their writing by themselves since they are probably unable to understand the information they get and produce correct grammatical sentences without any guidance from other person or people. Nonetheless, all the students in this study asked their peers to read the essay they made to get feedback from them. They discussed their essay with their peers about what should be revised from their essay. The students also got some feedbacks from their lecturer when they had their essay returned to them, and the feedbacks usually related to the grammar more than the content.

This peer-editing activity is an advantageous step to do in order to improve the students’ writing skill because can promote students’ independent writing (Charoenchang, 2011; as cited by Toofal, et al., 2016). As the students read and give feedback to each other’s essay, they would be less dependent on their lecturer because they thought that they could correct their essay by discussing it with their peers. Four students further explained that they felt comfortable discussing their essay with their peers because they had known each other quite well and they did not feel any pressure as they were both still learning.

Additionally, one student with high self-esteem level said that she actually preferred not to show her essay to her friend, but she did because the lecturer directed the students to do it. She further explained that she did not always follow her friend’s opinion in revising her essay when he did not feel that there was no problem in her essay. Her belief and action supported (Hellrieger & Slocum, 2009) argument that workers with high self-esteem could defend their opinions better than workers with low self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

The writing strategies used by both the students with high self-esteem level and the students with moderate self-esteem level were similar to each other. All of them tried to find mistakes and problems in their essay draft thus they could correct and fix it so that the quality of their essay could be improved. However, not all student-participants conducted the ‘mistake/problem-hunting’ in a same way. Three students with high self-esteem level and one student with moderate self-esteem level tended to depend on themselves first before asking for helps from somebody else to find the mistakes/problems in their essay. On the other hand, the other two students who had moderate self-esteem level tended to directly depend on the helps from another person/other people to find the mistakes/problems in their draft before doing it themselves.

Self-esteem could, more or less, influence the students’ decisions on the writing strategies they would do to revise their essay. It was supported by the fact that S4 and S5 did not re-read their essay draft because they were not confident enough to find their own mistake (as they stated in the questionnaire administered to select the participant of this study).

Since this study used a small sample size, the variety of the writing strategies used by students with different self-esteem to write an essay(s) were not much different from one student to the others. Therefore, future research may investigate the students’ writing strategies using larger sample size; thus, the result may have more variation. Future investigations may also investigate writing strategies used to write different types of text.

Using only a questionnaire as the instrument to measure the students’ self-esteem level can be considered not enough to get deeper result in distinguishing the students’ self-esteem level thus the students’ self-esteem scores were quite similar – they could even be considered as the same. Therefore, the researcher suggested that those interested in conducting research related to self-esteem should use other methods to measure students’ self-esteem level such as interviews to get deeper information about it.
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