PROBLEMS IN WRITING ENGLISH BUSINESS LETTER: ERRORS AND FACTORS

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Abstract

This study is conducted to identify the problems of error found in English business letter writing and to explain the factors that caused the problems.

This study used qualitative method. The data were collected from the English business letter written by third semester of Bina Bangsa Economics students majoring in Management and Accounting. The students were asked to respond a complaint letter from a customer of the given situation. The error category is based on Ferris and Hedgcock model (2005). The researcher identified the problems of error found in the letters and explained the factors that caused the problems to draw the conclusion.

The result shows that there are four classifications of error: morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical error. These four classification of errors are divided into eight types: verb, noun, article, word choice, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Word choice error was the highest frequency of error type (20.3%) followed by sentence structure error (18.3%), verb error (12.1%), punctuation error (11.3%), noun error (9.7%), spelling error (9.5%). Meanwhile, article and capitalization error shared the same percentage (9.4%). There were three major factors that caused the errors: language transfer, overgeneralization, and context of learning.

Keywords: error types, factors of error, business letter

1.   INTRODUCTION

The increasing importance of English as an international language has resulted in the expansion of one particular aspect of English Language Teaching, namely the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (Daniela, 2014). In higher educational institution like university or college, English is a course subject in almost all study programs, not only for language studies faculty or department. In Economics faculty or department, English course is usually known as English for Economics. Others may call it Business English. This course is taught in two semesters. The material of English for Economics is designed to meet the knowledge and skill of English language to be used in the field of Economics. The topics are related to the vocabularies and expressions in Economics, business letters writing, and translation of Economics text from English into Bahasa Indonesia and vice versa.

An ESP course, in this case English for Economics, may emphasize the development skill of Economics students to prepare them to work in related profession. However, Daniela (2014) stated that the acquisition of specific vocabulary in a foreign language by students is often slow, discouraging and even frustrating. Therefore, the teacher who works with students in economics has to perform a thorough analysis of his/her students in order to get to know them better. In this research, the researcher is interested to analyze student's ability in writing business letter, in this case a response letter. As a matter of fact, ESP combines subject matter and English language teaching (Syaripah, 2014). The students are expected to be able to apply the English lesson into their field of study, especially in Economics science.

In general, the researcher wants to analyze students' ability in English language, especially in practical matter. This study is conducted to identify the problems of error found in English business letter writing and to explain the factors that caused the problems. The study is expected to bring benefits and give contribution in the field of ESP teaching, especially for students of Economics in higher education level.

Brown (2004) explained three genres of writing: academic writing, job-related writing, and personal writing. The examples of academic writing are papers and general subject reports, essays, academic journals, technical reports, theses and dissertations. Another genre is job-related writing which includes messages, letters/mails, office memos, project reports/job evaluations, schedules, advertisements, announcements, and manuals. Last but not least, personal writing which is in the form of letters, emails, greeting cards, invitations, messages, notes, financial documents, forms, questionnaire, medical reports, immigration documents, diaries, and personal journals.

Johan (2014) explained that Business English is a variant of international English and it is especially related to international trade. Business English is a part of English for Specific Purposes and can be considered a specialism within English language learning and teaching. It may focus on language and skills needed for typical business communication such as presentations, negotiations, meetings, small talk, socializing, correspondence, report writing and a systematic approach. Frendo (2012) said that writing is s key part of day-to-day activities of most businesses and, like speaking, is used in a vast range of different situations. It allows communication across time and space, and provides an invaluable medium for storing records and other information.

One of the subjects in Business English course is writing Business letters. Business letter is any kinds of formal letter used in business activities. Each type of business correspondence has a specific design, tone, format, and level of formality suited to the purpose of the message and to the intended audience. Business letters are always formal. Business writing takes many forms each suited to a specific purpose. All business writing must be clear and concise with simple, straightforward language. It should be noted that in writing business letters should be clear, concise, and void of slang and jargon (Gilling, 2013).

Writing ability involves an omnibus set of skills and that writing performance is subject to a large number of factors, such as motivation, genre awareness, topic, reading ability, information literacy, and previous experience (Williams and Takaku, 2011). Writing is a difficult process even in the first language. It is even more complicated to write in a foreign language. Therefore, writing in a foreign language often presents the greatest challenge to the students at all stages (Hourani, 2008). Tarone (cited in Song, 2012) suggested that second language learners have a series of overlapping mental grammar which correspond to different contexts in which the second language is used. The working memory constraints that are caused by lack of fluent text production may also make it difficult for writers to avoid or correct certain syntactic errors (McCutchen, 2011). The problem of content - what to say – and the problem of rhetoric-how to say it - consume the writer's attention and other resources of working memory (Kellogg, 2008).

Assessment is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. Whenever a student responds to a question, offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student's performance (Brown, 2004). Language assessment is an important aspect in a teaching-learning process (Syaripah, 2014). Feedback provided by the teacher might focus on lesson recently given in the class, such as selecting and integrating quotations, verb tense shifts in narratives, effective inter-paragraph transitions, and so on (Ferris, 2007).

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors that learners make (Faisyal, 2015). Moreover, Saville-Troikke (cited in Faisyal, 2015) stated that error analysis is the first approach to the study of the second language acquisition which includes an internal focus on learner's creative ability to construct language. Ellis and Barkhuizen, (cited in Sychandone, 2016)

described error analysis as a set of procedures for identifying, describing, and explaining learner's errors; it is like the process of determining the incidence, nature, cause, and consequences of unsuccessful in language.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study is qualitative descriptive research which describes the problems found in writing English business letter and explains the causal factors. This study uses qualitative approach because the data is in the form of English business letters written by students of Economics science. The process of qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014).

This study is also an embedded-case study because the problem and the focus of the research have been decided by the researcher. Case study is a design of inquiry found in many fields, especially evaluation, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2014). Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Stake; Yin, as cited in Creswell: 2014).

2.2 Coverage and Limitation

The research is focused on identifying the problems of error found in English business letter writing and explaining the factors that caused the problems.

2.3 Setting of Place and Time

The research takes place in Bina Bangsa College which is located on Jl. Raya Serang-Jakarta Km. 03 No. 1B, Pakupatan, Serang, Banten. The research is conducted during the third semester of 2016/2017 academic year.

2.4 Technique of Collecting Data

Creswell (2012) stated that there are five interrelated steps in the process of qualitative data collection. The first is to identify participant and sites to be studied and to engage in sampling strategy. Second, is to gain access to these individuals and sites. Third, is to consider types of information that will best for research questions. Fourth, is to design protocols or instruments for collecting and recording the information. Finally, the fifth is to administer the data collection with special attention to potential ethical issues that may arise. However, these steps should not be seen as linear approaches, but often one step in the process does follow another (Creswell, *ibid*).

In qualitative inquiry, the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon. Thus, the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites. Therefore, the research term used for qualitative sampling is purposeful sampling. In this research, the purposeful sampling technique is used for selecting the participants. The participants of this research are the third semester of Bina Bangsa students who major in management and accounting study program. The third semester students are chosen as participants because they have fulfilled English for Economics I course, so they adequate Basic English lesson. The students are asked to respond a complaint letter from a customer of the given situation. There are 51 business letters, 39 letters written by management students and 12 letters written by accounting students.

2.5 *Technique of Data Analysis*

In qualitative research, the inquirer analyzes words or images (Creswell, 2012). In this research, the data is analyzed to identify the problems of error found in students' writing in terms of responding English complaint letter. The data analysis technique is adapted from Spradley's methodology of ethnographic analysis: domain, taxonomic, componential, and thematic (Mendoza, 2008). The researcher reads every composition of each letter, identifies the errors, classifies them, and then analyzes the errors.

In domain analysis, the errors are categorized based on Ferris and Hedgcock model (2005) into morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical error. Then, in taxonomic analysis, each category is divided into specific error subcategories. In analyzing the errors, the error log is used for identifying error patterns. The scheme of error log can be seen as follows:

Table 1. Sample of Error Log (adapted from Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005)

Data	Morphological			Lexical	Syntactic	Mechanical		
	Verb Error	Noun Error	Article Error	Word Choice Error	Sentence Structure Error	Spelling Error	Punctuation Error	Capitalization Error
01								
…								
051								

After the error patterns are identified, the total number of error is recapitulated (in componential analysis). The recapitulation can be seen in the following table:

Table 2. Recapitulation of Errors

Error Type		Frequency of Error	Percentage (%)
Morphological	Verb Error		
	Noun Error		
	Article Error		
Lexical	Word Choice Error		
Syntactic	Sentence Structure Error		
Mechanical	Spelling Error		
	Punctuation Error		
	Capitalization Error		
Σ			

In thematic analysis, after the problems are identified, the researcher explains the factors that cause the problems and draws the conclusion.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, there are 639 of errors found in 51 English business letters written by third semester students of Bina Bangsa College. The error frequency is calculated and presented in table 3.

Table 3. Error Frequency

Error Type		Frequency of Error
Morphological	Verb Error	77
	Noun Error	62
	Article Error	60
Lexical	Word Choice Error	130
Syntactic	Sentence Structure Error	117
Mechanical	Spelling Error	61
	Punctuation Error	72
	Capitalization Error	60
∑		639

The result of the analysis shows that there are 77 errors in verb, 62 errors in noun, 60 errors in article, 130 errors in word choice, 117 errors in sentence structure, 61 errors in spelling, 72 errors in punctuation, and 60 errors in capitalization. Word choice error is the most errors found, followed by sentence structure error, verb error, punctuation error, noun error, and spelling error. Meanwhile, article error and capitalization error share the same frequency.

3.1 Error Categories in Writing

In this study, the errors are analyzed and categorized into morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical error. Morphological error deals with errors in verb, noun, and article. Lexical error deals with word choice error, while syntactic error deals with sentence structure error. Last but not least, mechanical error deals with errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The category of error types can be seen in the following table:

Table 4. Types of Error Category

Error Category	Morphological	Lexical	Syntactic	Mechanical
	Verb		Sentence structure	Spelling
	Noun	Word choice		Punctuation
	Article			Capitalization

3.1.1 Morphological Error

Morphological errors indicate that learners have misconception about the meaning and function of morphemes and about the morphological rules and their exceptions (Ramadan, 2015); it relates to the construction of words and parts of words (Bloomfield, cited in Faisyal: 2015). This kind of error includes errors in verb, noun, and article.

Verb Error

The verb error occurs when the students use the verbs inappropriately in their writings. This happens when they have to deal with the tenses, the subject, and the preposition. Some examples of verb error are:

Replying to a letter complaining that Ms. Selena Swift send on 21 November 2016….. (MA/01)

The error on datum MA/01 is the use of the verb 'send.' The sentence is in the form of simple past tense. Therefore, the verb should be in past form (V2) 'sent.'

Hi dear, earlier in our company have a policy…. (MA/04)

In datum MA/04, the verb 'have' should be replaced with 'has' since the subject 'our company' is singular.

Noun Error

The noun error typically occurs as the students failed to recognize singular and plural nouns. This is usually in line with the use of a/an article and quantifier in their writing. Example:

....that goods that we have sent to you have some <u>problem</u>. (MA/014)

In datum MA/014, it indicates that there is more than one problem as there is a quantifier 'some' which indicates plural form.

Article Error

The article error occurs as the students failed to recognize the correct article and misplace the article before the name of a person. There is also minor article error as the students unconsciously repeat the same article in the sentence.

Replying to <u>a</u> letter complaining that Ms. Selena Swift send on 21 November 2016..... (MA/01)

In datum MA/01 the article should be definite article 'the' as it refers to particular letter. Other example is the misuse of article before the name of a person.

I am sorry to <u>the</u> Tarra Reid for this. (MA/011)

Tarra Reid is the customer who sent a complaint letter in this context of situation. She wrote the letter personally as a complaint for the inconvenience. Last but not least, there is article repetition in the sentence.

Your letter regarding the <u>the</u> complaint..... (MA/07)

3.1.2 Lexical Error

Lexical error is a type of error deals with the lexicon. The form of lexical error is error in word choice. Lexical errors are an inevitable part of the process of second language vocabulary acquisition, and as such they are evidence of that process (Agustin-Llach, 2007).

Word Choice Error

The word choice error refers to the use of inappropriate vocabulary/terminology in particular field and situation. It also deals with the parts of speech. Some words have different meaning when they are used in certain subject. The students often failed to recognize the appropriate word because they are much to transfer the word literally by ignoring the context. There are many cases of word choice error in this study for the students failed to differentiate between General English and Business English in terms of vocabulary/terminology. Some examples of word choice error:

Please forgive <u>we</u> for the damages. (AK/04)

We are from Shopinonline <u>apology</u> to Miss Selena Swift..... (AK/010)

The lexical errors in data AK/04 and AK/010 are the use of incorrect parts of speech. In datum AK/04, the student failed to recognize the pronoun whereas in datum AK/010, the student is still confused between verb and noun (apologize vs. apology).

Hi dear, <u>earlier</u> in our company have a policy.... (MA/04)

In datum MA/04, the intended meaning from the writer (the student) is explaining that the company already has a policy regarded to the problem on the given situation. This typical of language is usually in the opening part. In English communication, the common expression to begin our letter/speech is 'first of all.' However, the sentence should be revised to make it logical. Other similar expressions which are commonly used by the students are *before* and *previously*, as in the following examples:

Good afternoon, <u>before</u> I am sorry for this..... (MA/011)

Hi Tarra, <u>before</u> that we're from Shopinonline….. (MA/013)

<u>Previously</u>, thank you very much for your trust to Shopinonline. (MA/06)

<u>Previously</u>, I represent Shopinonline apologize for your dissatisfaction..... (AK/01)

Word choice error also occurs in using honorific title to address a person, in this case the customer. In Indonesian culture, such honorific title is used for addressing elder people or showing respect to others.

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Thus the <u>mother</u>'s complaint few days ago….. (MA/022)
Responding to a complaint letter that <u>mom</u> Selena Swift sent….. (MA/034)
We apologize to <u>madam</u> Selena Swift for this. (MA/036)
Dear <u>Mr</u>. Tarra Reid (MA/08)
Dear <u>Miss</u> (MA/017)
Dear <u>Sir</u> (MA/014)
Dear <u>Mrs</u> (MA/032)

The sentences are some examples of how the students failed in using honorific titles. In Indonesian culture, we usually address elder woman 'Ibu/Bu'. However, it is not the same as we refer to our parent (mother/mom). Most errors in using honorific title are due to language interference from Bahasa Indonesia and lack of cross-cultural understanding, including how to write salutation in formal letter by addressing male and female.

3.1.3 Syntactic Error

Syntactic error is a type of error which occurs in sentence structure. Syntax complexity is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL/EFL learners (Ngangbam, 2016).

Sentence Structure Error

Many students still write the incorrect sentence structure due to their less understanding of English grammar. Besides, they tend to write the sentence literally from Bahasa Indonesia into English. Some examples of errors in sentence structure are as follows:

For your attention, we thank you. (MA/08)
Thanks for complaints. Our company apologized products. (MA/016)
And thank you so much for this a complaint, because this letter the company can solving the problem. (MA/033)
Apologize for the delay and damage to goods that you order. (AK/06)
We from the online shop apologized for the goods you order a week ago. (AK/08)

Sentence structure error is a common problem for ESL/EFL learners who are not native speakers of English. The interference of mother tongue language cannot be avoided when they have lack understanding of English.

3.1.4 Mechanical Error

Mechanical error is a type of error which deals with spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. It is believed that in many cases, mechanical errors are the consequence of quick writing where the focus is on the content instead of the form.

Spelling Error

Spelling error is an error deals with the error in spelling the word. In most cases, the students misspell the words because they don't check the correct spelling in the dictionary. Examples:

So, <u>whithin</u> three days I will send another package. (MA/05)
….to <u>improv</u> our service and as soon as <u>posibble</u> to replace…. (MA/018)
While we can't give you an <u>exaplanation</u> now, we can promise you that…. (MA/014)
We'll replace your fashion product with new product in three days <u>latter</u>. (MA/012)
We apologize for the dissatisfaction <u>bicause</u>….. (AK/02)
We're from Shopinonline <u>appologized</u> for the mistake….. (AK/010)

Punctuation Error

In this research, the punctuation error is mostly in terms of using commas and periods. Punctuation marks such as comma and period should be used for separating the sentences to make clear meaning.

Capitalization Error

Capitalization error mostly occurs in writing a person's name or a company (e.g.: Tarra Reid, Selena Swift, Shopinonline) and in the beginning of a sentence. It is found that the students have less attention to the rule of using capital letter to write a name of a person or a company and to begin a sentence.

The recapitulation of errors made by the students in writing English business letter can be seen in the table below:

Table 5. Recapitulation of Errors in English Business Letter

Error Type		Frequency of Error	Percentage (%)
Morphological	Verb Error	77	12.1%
	Noun Error	62	9.7%
	Article Error	60	9.4%
Lexical	Word Choice Error	130	20.3%
Syntactic	Sentence Structure Error	117	18.3%
Mechanical	Spelling Error	61	9.5%
	Punctuation Error	72	11.3%
	Capitalization Error	60	9.4%
$\sum$		639	100%

3.2 Factors of Error

Based on the types of error that have been identified, there are three major factors why the errors occur:

3.2.1 Language Transfer

Language transfer is related to the ability of the ESL/EFL learners in transferring from their native language into foreign language. Language transfer can be positive if the students are able to write the correct sentence in English. It can be said that language transfer problem deals with interlingual interference. Some or many non-native speakers of English language tend to produce English sentences literally transferred from their native language.

In this research, it is found that the students have problems in language transfer matter. Most of the students are still interfered by Bahasa Indonesia grammar which is different from English in some or even many ways. When producing English writing, the students tend to employ direct translation from Bahasa Indonesia into English as they have the cognitive process in Bahasa Indonesia. As the result, there are grammatical errors in most of their writing.

3.2.2 Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization can be defined as expressing the target language using linguistic knowledge that has been known before. The case of overgeneralization in this research is the students fail to recognize some terminologies or vocabularies related in business correspondence. In other words, they tend to generalize the language and do not pay attention to the difference between general English and business English.

3.2.3 Context of Learning

Context of learning can happen if the students misunderstand the explanation during the process

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of learning. When they apply the lesson improperly, the result will be incorrect. It also happens when the students copy from incorrect sources. In this research, it is found that some students only copy their friend's work without checking it or revise it. As the result, they produce the same number of errors in their writing.

4.   CONCLUSION

There are four classifications of error found in English business letter written by third semester students: morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical error. These four of errors are divided into eight types, namely: verb, noun, article, word choice, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Word choice error is the highest frequency of error type (20.3%), respectively followed by sentence structure error (18.3%), verb error (12.1%), punctuation error (11.3%), noun error (9.7%), spelling error (9.5%). Meanwhile, article and capitalization error share the same percentage of 9.4%.

There are three major factors that cause the errors: language transfer, overgeneralization, and context of learning. Most of the students are still interfered by Bahasa Indonesia grammar which is different from English. Besides, the students fail to recognize some terminologies or vocabularies related in business correspondence; they tend to generalize the language and do not pay attention to the difference between general English and business English. Last but not least, it deals with the context of learning in which the students have some misunderstanding about the explanation during the process of learning and only copy their friend's work without checking it or revise it.

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