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EFL STUDENTS' WRITING ERRORS AND OBSTACLES IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The research is intended to analyze the use of past tense auxiliary *be* in 10th grade students' writing in one of the high schools in Banda Aceh. The objectives of this study were: (1) to investigate the students' errors in using *was* and *were* in their essays through AntConc software quantitatively, (2) to find out the students' obstacles in using past tense auxiliary *be* in their essays qualitatively. The results of AntConc corpus software showed that the most errors in the essays were the use of patterns *was* and *were* with *subject+was/were+noun*. This denotes that even for the simple past tense, the students still struggled to produce correct grammar in writing. To understand the students' obstacles, we interviewed 10 students. They revealed some reasons on why they faced difficulty in learning these tenses and English in general, they are: the system of grammar in Indonesian is very different from English, lack of vocabulary to write good sentences, lack of motivation (e.g. less support from family members, discrimination from the teachers in class, and being occupied with extracurricular activities after school), and the teachers' lack of proficiency.

Keywords: *AntConc software, past tense auxiliary be, errors, obstacles, writing.*

INTRODUCTION

In English grammar, past tense auxiliary *be* in the past tense is related with nouns, adjectives and adverbs. According to Uchiyama (2006), the past tense usually means that this action ended in the past. These various forms should be chosen carefully because proper subjects should meet their

proper verbs. Singular subjects require singular verbs; plural subjects require plural verbs.

In our preliminary study in one of the high schools in Banda Aceh, it was found that the use of past tense auxiliary *be* (e.g. the use of *was* and *were*), still becomes one of the major problems in writing to these EFL students. They were visibly detected in the essays they write and submitted to their teacher. In assessment, the focus of the teacher is generally in the content and genre of writing, while the problem in tenses is only assessed at a glance, especially when the data is large. Thus, the errors made by the students tend to be repeated because teachers are ignorant of these problems in their writing. This leads to a dilemma when the students later attend the National Examination, where much focus is on the grammar of English.

Dealing with large data is a part of the study in corpus linguistics (Yusuf, 2009). Sinclair (1997) states that corpus linguistics is the study of language through corpus-based research. This software is used to analyze real texts input into the computer. Reppen (2010) further states that corpus is a large, principled collection of naturally occurring texts (written or spoken) stored electronically. Nevertheless, a corpus does not contain new information about language, but the software offers us a new perspective (Hunston, 2002).

There is some corpus software available for researchers to use when they need to deal with large data, namely, WordSmith, MonoConc, COBUILD and AntConc. Some of these need to be purchased and some are freely available in the internet. AntConc is among the free software that can be downloaded and used by linguists. AntConc corpus software program was released in 2004 by Prof. Laurence Anthony in Waseda University, Japan. It is distributed as a single executable file that can be simply copied onto the user's computers and launched without requiring any installation. It comprises many tools useful for analyzing language or data being input in the software, among them are concordance tool, concordance search term plot tool, view files tool, word list/keyword list tools, and word clusters/bundles tool (refer to Anthony (2004) for a complete explanation on the function of each tool). The strength of this corpus software is helpful for beginners because first, it is easy to operate. Second, it performs all operations directly on the raw texts of the corpus (Hockey, 2001). Finally, the results in all display windows of AntConc can easily be copied and pasted directly into a spreadsheet program by using

simple keyboard shortcuts. All the same, it also has a weakness, which is in the handling of annotated data such as data encoded in HTML/XML format. Although AntConc offers a simple way to view or hide embedded tags used in HTML/XML and other annotation methods, much more sophisticated methods need to be implemented if the full power of annotated data is to be realized.

Studying the students' grammar errors in writing by using corpus software has been conducted by many researchers. Among them is Yusuf (2009), who studied the use of prepositions *to* and *for* from written essays collected from students at a university in Malaysia. The software used was WordSmith. It was found that despite the subjects were university students who had been learning English for more than ten years of their education, grammatical errors were still commonly found in the use of *to* and *for* as prepositions. Furthermore, Manokaran, Ramalingam and Adriana (2013), who also used WordSmith to study on the use of past tense auxiliary *be* in argumentative essays of Malaysian ESL university learners, found that these students still made errors in tense shift, agreement, missing auxiliary *be*, wrong verb form, addition, misformation and misordering. Past tense auxiliary *be* is one of the basic and simple forms of grammar, but these students still had difficulty and made many grammatical errors in their writing. The use of corpus software has eased the researchers processing massive data in a short time, and with total accuracy.

Nonetheless, the difficulties in English writing is a problem by ESL and EFL students almost everywhere around the world; Inayah and Nanda (2016) revealed that among the difficulties in content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, grammatical errors in language use were the utmost setback to EFL students, especially in Aceh, Indonesia. Khajloo (2013) have also discussed that the problems in learning English in countries that treats it as a foreign language, such as Iran, are insufficient hours of English in schools and lack of practice from the students' part, students' lack of interest and motivation, and teachers' lack of teaching proficiency. The setbacks in Saudi Arabia are pointed out by Elyas and Al-Grigri (2014) as scarcity of development programs, scarcity of in-service training, weakness of in-service training programs, low students' motivation, overuse of traditional teaching methods, scarcity of using teaching aids and modern technology, weakness of school supplies, and scarcity of language laboratories. Meanwhile, In Pakistan, Khan and Khan

(2016) listed ambiguous educational policies, bias attitude towards English, behavior of parents and teachers, the adverse policies of the government, unavailability of modern teaching technology to the public sector, shortage of English teachers especially in remote areas, flawed syllabi and examination system, lack of teacher training and deprived position of teachers are among the hindrances in learning and improving English for the EFL students.

In view of that, we would also like to investigate the grammatical errors and to what extent they are made by the students in one of the high schools in Banda Aceh. Based on the fact described on corpus software and large data, we offer the use of corpus in analyzing these students' writing, especially on the use of past tense auxiliary *be* (i.e. *was* and *were*). We further extend our study to also look into the obstacles faced by the students in learning them. It is hoped that the results of this research can be beneficial for teachers in becoming more aware of the errors that their students are making in writing, and why they have problems in learning English, to provide better solutions to resolve them in the future.

METHODS

To answer the research questions, this research employed quantitative and qualitative design in nature. Qualitative in this study is the percentage result of the errors from AntConc corpus software analysis. Qualitative design in this study is to describe the errors in the use of past tense auxiliary *be* in the students writing nominal sentence and explain the obstacles faced by the students in understanding past tense auxiliary *be* and English in general.

This study involved collecting essays from 10th grade students of one of the high schools in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. A total of 39 students from two classes were purposively selected to write three essays each. The essays were descriptive with the topic "Meeting the Idols" and they were to write them in the past tense in nominal sentences. Each essay was about 150 words. At the end, we collected 117 essays from the students, with 16.000 words in total. Meanwhile, for interview, we selected five students from each class who had the lowest reading scores to inquire about their difficulties in using past tense auxiliary *be* and learning English in general, making a total of ten students.

The collected essays were input into the AntConc corpus software for analyses; we particularly focused on the errors in the use of past tense auxiliary *be:was* and *were*. With this software, we could conduct concordances for the use of *was* and *were* in the students' essays. Concordance is a search engine that shows what sorts of words tend to occur in the immediate environment of a given word, in this case, *wasandwere*. Next, these words were clustered to observe the total of cluster types and cluster tokens in those words. Then, we plotted the words in focus to see the collocation, which is their frequency of words used in the students' essays. The results were then tabulated into percentage

Moreover, the interview guide was to gain answers for the obstacles faced by these students' in learning English, particularly in using *was* and *were*. The main questions asked during the interviews were: (1) What are your obstacles in writing past tense auxiliary *be*? (2) Why is past tense auxiliary *be* difficult for you to use in writing? and (3) Is learning English difficult for you? Why?

The interview session was done after class by the third author; and each session with a student lasted about 5-10 minutes. They were recorded with a hand phone. Later, the interviews were transcribed, segmented and analyzed descriptively. In analysis, we used the steps of data reduction, data display, and verification (refer to Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013) for detailed description of each step).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concordances of *was*

From the concordance, *was* appeared with 352 concordances in the written corpus. From these concordances, there were 140 concordances which contained errors. They were 80 concordances for the pattern *subject+was+noun*, 40 concordances for the pattern *subject+was+adverb*, and 20 concordances for the pattern *subject+was+adjective*. An example of error from each pattern found in data is displayed in Table 1. The percentages are the number of errors divided by the whole *was* concordances found in data.

Table1. Examples of errors in the *was* patterns.

<i>No</i>	<i>Line</i>	<i>Pattern</i>	<i>Example of errors</i>	<i>Concordances</i>	<i>%</i>
1	36	<i>Subject+was+noun</i>	Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Jusuf Kallawas President and Vice President of Indonesia.	80	22.7%
2	591	<i>subject+was+adverb</i>	he born in Kanada, 1 March 1994.	40	11.4%

3	476	Subject+was+adjective	Soeharto was the two president of Indonesia.	20	5.7%
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In example number 1, the subjects *Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono* and *Jusuf Kalla* are classified as plural subject forms. It should use *were* agreement instead of *was*. The additional word *asin* in the sentence is also incorrect. The correct sentence should be, "*Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Jusuf Kalla were the President and the Vice President of Indonesia*". Then example number 2 illustrates a missing past tense auxiliary *be* in the sentence that follows the adverb *born*. The following phrase *1 March 1994* should also include the preposition *on*. Furthermore, the sentence also had punctuation problem, in which the beginning of the sentence should have started with a capital letter. The name of the country was also misspelled. Thus, the correct sentence is, "*He was born in Canada on 1 March 1994*". Meanwhile, in example number 3, it shows the incorrect use of *two* in the sentence; after the use of *was* in this pattern, it should be followed by *the second* as the adjective. The correct version is, "*Soeharto was the second president of Indonesia*". Similar to these findings, Manokaran, Ramalingam and Adriana (2013), also found agreement, missing auxiliary *be*, addition and misformation among the errors typically made by students in writing.

Concordances of *were*

From 41 concordances of *were* that contained errors, ten concordances were found in pattern *subject+were+noun*, nine concordances in *subject+were+adverbs*, and four concordances in *subject+were+adjectives*. An example of error from each pattern found in data is displayed in Table 2. The percentages are the number of errors divided by the whole *were* concordances found in data.

Table 2. Examples of errors in the *were* patterns.

No	Line	Pattern	Example of errors	Concordances	%
4	33	Subject+were+noun	My mom saw there was an actresses who were shooting. She was a model, singer and actress.	10	24.4%
5	27	subject+was+adverb	His working period as the President of Indonesia were March 12, 1967 until May 21, 1998.	9	21.9%
6	6	Subject+were+adjective	There werea famous stories about him.	4	9.8%

Example number 4 illustrates the mistake that one of the students had made because he/she could not identify whether the object in the sentence (i.e. *actresses*) was plural or singular, despite the following sentence clearly indicates that it was singular (i.e. *She*). The first sentence is also missing an object after the phrase, "...*an actress who was shooting...*". Consequently, the correct sentence should be, "*My mom saw that there was an actress who was shooting a movie. She was a model, singer and actress.*" Moreover, in example number 5, the subject of the sentence clearly indicates that it is singular (i.e. *the President*), thus, the student used *were* as the past tense auxiliary *be* and this is incorrect. The sentence is also missing the preposition *from* to indicate the time period of the President's working period. As a result, the correct sentence is, "*His working period as the President of Indonesia was from March 12, 1967 until May 21, 1998*". Finally, in example number 6, adjectives are typically uncountable, and so, the use of the article *a* was unnecessary in the sentence. The sentence should be written as, "*There were famous stories about him*".

Similar to the concordances of *was*, in the concordances of *were* most errors were also found in pattern *subject+were+noun*. This suggests that even for the basic simple past tense, students were still struggling in producing correct grammar.

Students' Obstacles

From the results of interview, we found that the students' obstacles were in the issue of understanding, lack of motivation and the teacher's teaching performances in the class.

Understanding

All of the students interviewed claimed that they had trouble in understanding the singular and plural use of subjects that further specify the use of *was* and *were* in the past tense sentences. This is because this rule is not applied in Indonesian grammar, which does not distinguish between the uses of verbs for singular or plural subjects. This led to difficulties in constructing the proper patterns of *was* and *were* in English sentences. Lack of vocabulary was also a drawback in constructing English sentences, and this is as supported by Inayah and Nanda (2016). An extraction from the interview with a student, coded as AB, elaborated these reasons as follows.

E1: "The obstacles, Miss? It confuses me that there are plural and singular nouns in English. I also don't know much of English vocabulary. We need to remember and memorize them. English has a lot of patterns...in the present, in the past and future...and all of these have different patterns. They are unlike the Indonesian language. It is easier to learn the Indonesian language than English". (AB)

YN in E2 further voiced that when she watched English movies, the actors or actress did not use grammatical sentences all the time and, thus, when learning English in school, the grammar comes in and this made her meaningless to study. Despite taking English courses after school every weekday, it did not help her to understand English better.

E2: "If I watch Hollywood movies, I hear that the actors and actresses don't really speak English like the way we learn in school; with all the perfect grammar and stuff. In school, English is all rules and patterns, that's why I'm lazy to learn it. For me, English is really hard to understand. Even though, I take a course after school, but I don't understand about it at all, Miss". (YN)

Motivation

Apart from understanding, there was the motivational factor that caused the students to be not enthusiast in learning. This is in line with Khajloo (2013) and Elyas and Al-Grigri (2014). In this study, a student said that he had to help his parents after school, and thus, made him lazy to hit the English books after school for reviews (refer to E3). Despite initially having motivation to learn English from himself, thus he lacked support and stimulus from his parents. Over time, his motivation declined and felt contempt to further learn English. Another student even claimed that a discrimination imposed upon him during his elementary school years caused him to dislike English until today; DY said he was traumatized by the prejudice (refer to E4). He said that his English teacher during his elementary years was not fair in the class. The teacher treated him unfairly because he was not clever and was poor. Due to the experience, it was implanted in his mind that all English teachers have similar attitudes in every school.

E3: "After arriving at home, I have to take care of the store, so I cannot take English courses. When I was in the first grade in junior high school, I had asked my parents several times to enroll me to an English course after school, but they never agreed. They reasoned that there is no one took care of our store in the afternoon. I am really weak in English lesson, Miss. That is why I need to take a course after school, but my parents never gave me permission to do so. That's why now, I just accept it...I'm lazy to ask about their reasons". (CL)

E4: "While I was in elementary school, Miss, my English teacher was not fair; she liked to discriminate the students. If the students were not smart but rich, they would always get good scores. But if the students, like me, are not smart and poor, she gave the lowest scores. My teacher's discrimination has traumatized me until senior high school now. You know, Miss, teachers in school should not discriminate students, whether smart or not, rich or not. We are students; we go to school to learn." (DY)

Another reason why students lack motivation of learning English was because some were too busy with extracurricular programs after school. For example, FR in E5 explained that he was one of the basketball players in school. Every day, he practiced basketball until evening and when he returned home he was already tired and sleepy. He admitted that he never learned at home to review the lessons taught in school and he always borrowed notes and homework from his friends. He declared that the teachers never noticed because he was concealed by his status as the school's sport star. His parents also supported him more in the extracurricular program because he was the best sport player in school, especially basketball.

E5: My hobby is playing basketball. I play basketball every day after school. If I think about it, actually I am really lost in school because I am ignoring my lessons, but my parents are one hundred percent supportive of me playing basketball. They said sport is a good way to prevent me from the bad influences in our environment. Anyways, English is really hard to understand, Miss, it has a lot of tenses and patterns that are confusing. So I usually borrow the notes or homework from my friends when it comes to English. The teachers never really know that I don't do the work because I excel in sport. They look at me as the basketball star of the school". (FR)

The Teachers

Finally, the students criticized the teachers because they did not teach them with vivacity. As found in previous studies, teachers' lack of proficiency is also an obstacle for students in learning (Khajloo, 2013; Elyas & Al-Grigri, 2014; Khan & Khan, 2016). The students said the teachers taught by text books and always focused on the tenses. This became more tedious from time to time. Instead, they claimed that should the teachers create fun quizzes and games in the teaching learning process, English then would be more interesting to them. This is as pronounced by RD in E6.

E6: Ehm, the teachers' teaching performance...when the teachers gave the lesson in front of the class, they always use the same technique, it's really boring. They should create a dialogue or quiz but in a fun way. Please, please don't always teach us about the patterns! Nothing special and new...that's why I don't like English, Miss". (RD)

Furthermore, RP in E7 also adds that the teachers need to give more attention to students who have low scores in English and help them understand better with the materials being taught in class. The materials should also be presented in ways that are interesting to the students, with examples that they could relate to and not just on theories.

E7: The teachers needs to give more attention to the students who have low scores and do not understand about past tense auxiliary *be*. They should explain about the materials more clearly, with

examples that are fun and those that we can relate to. The teacher can put us in groups to study. You know, not just giving us theory all the time. So, the students like me will understand, Miss".(RP)

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to answer two research questions, which asked about the errors made by the students in using past tense auxiliary *be* (*was* and *were*) in writing and the students' obstacles in using it in their essays. Based on the findings of the study, it was found that the students made the most errors in the similar pattern of *was* and *were*, which was *subject+was/were+noun*. It denotes that even for the simple past tense, the students still struggled to produce correct grammar in writing. The obstacles the students faced in learning these tenses and English in general was that the system of grammar in Indonesian is very different from English as it does not have tenses such as those in English. Vocabulary was also a tussle since they need to memorize them to write good sentences. Lack of motivation because of less support from family members, discrimination from the teachers in class, and being occupied with extracurricular activities after school, was also a factor that made them ignore English. To end with, the teachers' lack of proficiency in teaching English lessened their interest in learning English. The students preferred the teachers to teach with spirit and with a variety of methods that can excite the classroom atmosphere to learn.

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