
In Search of Good Student Teachers in Writing Skill: The Impact of Different Task Variance on EFL Writing Proficiency

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Abstract

The purpose of this experimental study was to investigate the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency at one public university's English Education Program in Jambi, Indonesia. Two groups of the first year students were selected as participants. Each consisted of 30 students. Group I was required to perform the writing task and provided with a topic sentence and group II was required to perform the writing task and provided with signal words. The results of the test were rated or scored by using the analytical and holistic rating systems. The data were analyzed statistically by using Independent Sample T – Test and Correlation. The findings of the study showed that on average, Group I had a higher level of effect on student's writing proficiency ($M = 72.57$, $SE = 1.81$) than Group II on student's writing proficiency ($M = 56.50$, $SE = 2.16$). This difference is significant ($t(58) = 5.70$; $p < 0.05$). Our findings suggest the interactions among the components of complexity have a strong correlation. The positive relationships among the components of coherence are also statistically proved. We concluded that providing topic sentences helps students much better to develop paragraph writing than providing signal words.

Submitted

19 May 2015

Revised

15 October 2015

Accepted

08 February 2016

Keywords:

*Student teachers,
Different task variance,
EFL writing proficiency.*

Suggested Citation:

Makmur, Ismiyati, Y., Mukminin, A., & Verawati. (2016). In search of good student teachers in writing skill: The impact of different task variance on EFL writing proficiency. *International Journal of Academic Research in Education*, 2(1), 1-10. DOI: 10.17985/ijare.45901

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INTRODUCTION

The field of foreign language writing has come of age. The formal studies of EFL writers, writing, and writing instruction are relatively limited but fruitful, especially on the subject of the impact of using task-based approach in language teaching and learning on written language production (e.g., Lynch & Maclean, 2000; Lee, 2002; Adam, 2003; Castro, 2004; Snellings, Van Gelderen, & Glopper, 2004; Ellis & Yuan, 2004). For example, Snellings, Van Gelderen, & Glopper (2004) compared the influence of two different variables such as productive translation task, and lexical decision task on fluency of lexical retrieval in writing. These conditions caused different influences on learners' writing work. The productive translation task had positive effects on fluency of lexical retrieval writing, but the lexical decision task did not have positive effects on the speed of the learners' writing work. Additionally, an experimental study on forty-two Chinese learners' written narratives conducted by Ellis and Yuan (2004) through using three types of conditions including pre-planning, unpressured on-line planning, and no planning condition showed mixed results. In their study, pre-planning condition had positive effects on syntactic variety while on-line planning condition affected accuracy positively, but the variable of no planning condition did not have any positive effect on fluency, complexity, and accuracy.

Another task treatment was carried out by Adams (2003) who focused on investigating the effect of task repetition, noticing, and noticing + SR (stimulated recall session). The findings indicated that the variable of noticing + SR had positive effect on post-treatment output while the task repetition and noticing did not have positive effects on post-treatment output. Furthermore, Lee (2002) implemented an experimental study through employing two different variables namely a number of coherence-creating devices and pedagogical materials on coherence of learners' writing work. The results indicated that through an explicit teaching of coherence, the coherence of participants' writing improved and participants were cautious of the discourse level of text while revising. Another interesting study was conducted by Castro (2004) who investigated the degree of cohesion and coherence and the social construction of meaning in the essays among thirty Filipino college freshmen. The results of this study indicated that low, mid, and highly rated essays were equal in grammatical cohesive device use and to establish lexical cohesion, lexical repetition and use of synonyms were commonly used.

Viewed from instructional aspects, it is clear that most studies mentioned above investigate the effects of using task-based approach on various aspects of writing proficiency. In other words, those studies focus more on investigating the impacts of teaching and learning process in writing instruction. Overall, the studies which involve various variables and conditions have different effects on linguistic variables for instance, complexity and coherence. Some studies have positive effects on linguistic variables. Others do not have significant influences on linguistic variables which become the study focus. The findings of the previous studies have indicated that no previous studies implement a task treatment focusing on different task variance that involves two different conditions (e.g., providing participants with topic sentences and stimulating participants with signal words) for non-English speaking students. Also, no former studies examine the complexity and coherence in writing a paragraph for students from non-English speaking countries such as Indonesia. The purpose of the present study was to find out the impacts of providing topic sentences and signal words on writing proficiency among EFL student teachers at one public university's English Education Program in Jambi, Indonesia.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this experimental study was to investigate the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency at one public university's English Education Program in Jambi, Indonesia. Two main questions guided this study in an attempt to investigate the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency: (1) Do providing topic sentences have a higher level of effect on learner's writing proficiency than providing signal word on learner's writing proficiency? (2) Do providing topic sentence have a higher level of effect on complexity and coherence than providing signal words on complexity and coherence? Additionally, in this study, one general hypothesis was proposed: There is an effect of different task variance that involves providing topic sentence and providing signal words on learners' writing proficiency which cover complexity and coherence.

METHOD

Design

The design of the present study was classified as a naturally occurring group design. It is the same as a quasi-experimental design. This design needs comparisons between the mean performances of groups that occur normally. Based on this design, the samples were not randomly assigned because they belonged to one group or the other (Brown, 1988). Fraenkel and Wallen (2008) explained that in the static-group comparison design, two groups already existed, and the subjects were not randomly assigned. This study used different task variance as independent variable involving two different task conditions including providing topic sentences and providing signal words. The dependent variable was the writing proficiency with two elements (complexity and coherence). The population of this research was all the first year student teachers of English Education Program, one public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The samples of this study consisted of two groups of student teachers and each group consisted of 30 participants. The following table shows the design of this study which was modified from the static-group comparison design (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008).

Table 1. *The design of this study*

| Group | Treatment | Measurement |
|-------|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | Providing Topic Sentence | Writing Proficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complexity• Coherence |
| 2 | Providing Signal Words | Writing Proficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complexity• Coherence |

Participants of the study

The participants in this study consisted of two groups of full-time undergraduate student teachers who were in their first year at English Education Program, one public university in Jambi, Indonesia. They were between 18 and 21 years old. When the data of this study were collected, the students had been learning English as a foreign language in Indonesian schools for seven years. Formally, they began to study English

at junior high school for three years and at senior high school for three years. They studied English at junior and senior high schools based on curriculums of the schools. None of them had gone to an English speaking country. Outside the classroom, they had a little opportunity to use English either in written or oral forms. They could only practice their English with their friends who studied at the same program. They also used their English in written forms when they did their homework. In addition, when the participants performed the task for collecting data, they had taken the writing courses. Thus, they had recognized some terminologies related to paragraph structures such as topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding sentences, and signal words or transitional words.

The student teachers were selected based on groups or classes that were available in the program at the research site. In other words, we selected two groups of student teachers from the four groups or classes that were available. This way was done based on the idea or principle that Brown (1988) suggested that you should examine each study to determine the method the classes or groups that were selected. The way of selecting the sample of the study referred to the naturally occurring group design or quasi-experimental design. These were groups into which student teachers were not randomly assigned because they naturally belonged to one group or the other. In this case, we only took two groups of student teachers to be the samples of the study.

Materials and procedures

The different task variance involving providing topic sentences and providing signal words was designed based on the ideas or principles that learners' performance can be influenced by task characteristics or task conditions (Skehan, 2003). In this study, the materials of the different task variance were developed from the book of "Ready to Write" (Blanchard & Root, 2003, p. 35). To make it clear, we constructed the materials of the task variance in the form of picture and followed by a set of writing activities which have two types of conditions or characteristics as stimulants for participants to perform the task. Both conditions were providing topic sentence and providing signal words. These conditions or characteristics were implemented in a quasi-experimental study in order to investigate their effects on learner's writing proficiency covering complexity and coherence. By giving stimulants to the participants, we expected that these stimulants could promote greater writing proficiency.

The task variance was constructed in two different characteristics or conditions, where the participants were required to perform or complete it. This writing task was used as an instrument for gathering data of the present study. The task that was given to participants used a picture. This picture describes a condition of a top of a desk. On the top of the desk, there are several items or articles in which the position of each item or article had been arranged properly. The names of items or articles on the desk were: lap top computer, newspapers, printing machine, calendar, magazines, books, notebooks, and calculator. Participants were required to write a paragraph which explains the condition of the top of the desk based on the picture given.

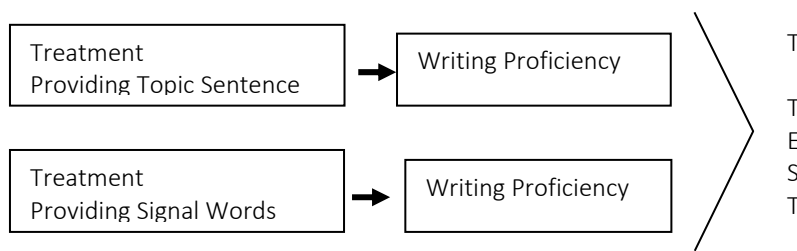
Participant's writing product constituted a paragraph which describes a condition of a top of the desk. The writing product would be scored as a writing proficiency score. The writing work was rated by using the holistic procedure and analytic procedure. Analytical rating was done by using an analytical form. In this study, the analytical rating covered the aspects related to paragraph structures such as topic sentence, details, concluding sentence, and signal words. The holistic rating was performed after the analytical rating with the range of score of 0 – 50 (Van Weijen, 2008). In case of the holistic rating, we just evaluated the paragraph as a whole about how the participants used grammar in writing paragraph unity. The final score of writing proficiency was taken from the analytical rating plus holistic rating and divided by two.

In this study participants were required to perform different task variance that has two different conditions such as providing topic sentences and providing signal words. The participants were divided into two groups. Each group consisted of 30 students. One group was required to perform a task that provides a topic sentence condition. Another group was required to perform the task which provides signal words condition. Both groups were given 20 minutes to write one paragraph. The tasks were administered in the same time for both groups. All students or participants were given worksheets which are equipped with a picture and a set of instruction for doing the tasks. After the students had done the task for about 20 minutes, they were asked to collect their writing products and they also returned the worksheet that is equipped with a picture and a set of instruction for doing the task.

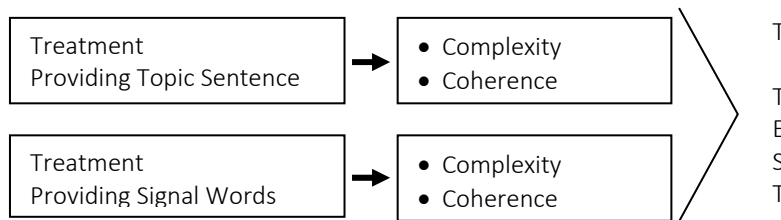
Data analysis

The data of this study were taken from the results of participants' performances on the different task variance. The data of this study constituted the writing proficiency scores. In details, the first data were taken from participants who performed the task of which the condition was providing a topic sentence. The second data were taken from the participants who performed the task of which condition was providing signal words. The written products of each group was rated by using the holistic rating system and analytic rating system (Van Weijen, 2008). Then the combination of these scores was a fixed score or the final score of the writing proficiency for each participant. The fixed writing proficiency scores of each group was statistically analyzed to find out the level of significant effects of treatments on student's writing proficiency by using 'Independent t-test'. Field (2009) explained that the t- test could be used to test if the two group means were different. Then, to know how the components of complexity and the components of coherence correlated or interacted each other in each group, we used a correlation statistical analysis. The correlation tried to find the relationship between variables by using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient or Pearson correlation coefficient (Field, 2009). The alpha level for this study was 0.05 ($\alpha = 0.05$). This value was normally used to say incorrectly rejecting the null hypothesis of the present study. In short, to make the data analysis clearer, we presented the schematic model of the data analysis as drawn below.

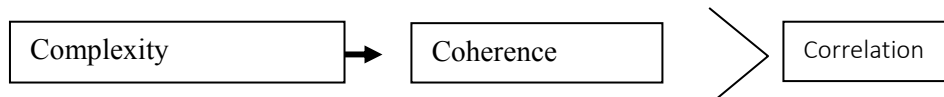
Model 1. *Data analysis of providing topic sentence and signal words on writing proficiency*



Model 2. *Data analysis of providing topic sentence and signal words on complexity and coherence*



Model 3. *Data analysis of correlation between complexity and coherence*



Ethical considerations

We masked the names of participants, places, and research place in order to protect the rights of participants in this study. Additionally, participants' participation in this study was totally voluntary.

FINDINGS

The current study aimed to investigate the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency at one public university's English Education Program in Jambi, Indonesia. The following part will present the results of the statistical analyses of the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency.

The effects of providing topic sentences and signal words on writing proficiency

The findings of this study on the effects of providing topic sentences and signal words on writing proficiency based on the statistical analysis by using independent sample t - test indicated that on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on student's writing proficiency ($M = 72.57$, $SE = 1.81$) than the Group II (providing signal words) on student's writing proficiency ($M = 56.50$, $SE = 2.16$). This difference was significant with the ($t(58) = 5.70$; $p < 0.05$).

The effects of providing topic sentences and signal words on complexity

The findings of this study on the effects of providing topic sentences and signal words on complexity based the statistical analysis by using the independent t – test indicated that first, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on the main clause ($M = 2.41$, $SE = 0.292$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on the main clause ($M = 1.53$, $SE = 0.221$). The difference was significant with the ($t(39) = 2.35$; $p < 0.05$). Second, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on dependent clauses ($M = 2.41$, $SE = 0.292$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on dependent clauses ($M = 1.53$, $SE = 0.221$). The difference was significant with ($t(39) = 2.35$; $p < 0.05$). Third, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on complex sentence ($M = 2.41$, $SE = 292$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on complex sentence ($M = 1.53$, $SE = 221$). The difference was significant with the ($t(39) = 2.35$; $p < 0.05$). Fourth, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on t-units ($M = 2.41$, $SE = 292$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on t - units ($M = 1.53$, $SE = 221$). The difference was significant with the ($t(39) = 2.35$; $p < 0.05$).

In contrast, the effect of providing topic sentence was lower than the effect of providing signal words on some components of complexity. For example, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a lower level of effect on simple sentence ($M = 6.03$, $SE = 0.237$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on simple sentence ($M = 7.23$, $SE = 0.278$). The difference was significant with the ($t(58) = 2.35$; $p < 0.05$). Then, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a lower level of effect on compound sentence ($M = 2.90$, $SE = 0.224$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on compound sentence ($M = 2.35$, $SE = 0.310$).The difference was significant with the ($t(58) = 1.467$; $p < 0.05$).

The effects of providing topic sentences and signal words on coherence

The findings of this study on the effects of providing topic sentences and signal words on each of components of Coherence by using the independent t – test indicated that first, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on connectors ($m = 8.37$, $se = 0.222$) than the effect of group ii (providing signal words) on connectors ($M = 7.272$., $SE = 0.258$).The difference was significant with the ($t(58) = 3.231$; $p < 0.05$). Then, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on key nouns ($M = 9.90$, $SE = 0.369$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on key nouns ($M = 8.37$, $SE = 0.305$). The difference was significant with the ($t(58) = 3.201$; $p < 0.05$). Second, on average, Group I (providing topic sentence) had a higher level of effect on pronouns ($M = 10.97$, $SE = 0.327$) than the effect of Group II (providing signal words) on pronouns ($M = 9.10$, $SE = 0.268$).The difference was significant with the ($t(58) = 4.413$; $p < 0.05$).

Correlations between components of complexity and coherence

The data analysis of the relationships between the components of complexity indicated a significant positive relationship between main clause and dependent clause, $r = 1.000$; $p < 0.01$. Also there was a significant negative relationship between simple sentence and compound sentence, $r = -.604$; $p < 0.01$. The analysis also indicated a significant positive relationship between Complex Sentence and T Unit, $r = 1.000$; $p < 0.01$.

For the correlation between components of coherence, the results of analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between connectors and pronouns, $r = 0.540$; $p < 0.01$. Also, there was a significant positive relationship between key nouns and pronouns, $r = 0.460$; $p < 0.01$.

DISCUSSION

Writing is a noteworthy skill for success in education. Regrettably, it seems that many students still face difficulties with written language production. These students may have lack of knowledge on writing processes; particularly when they are required to write in English as a foreign language. They may have no writing cultural backgrounds and may need long-lasting exposure and internalization to different language rules (Mukminin, Ali, & Ashari, 2015). The purpose of this experimental study was to investigate the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency at one public university's English Education Program in Jambi, Indonesia. The findings of the current study shed light on our understanding of the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency.

In terms of writing proficiency, referring to the results of the (t – test) statistical analysis, it indicated that providing topic sentence conditions had higher effect on learner's writing proficiency than the effect of providing signal words. This was supported by the different mean values between these conditions. The mean value of the providing topic sentence was bigger than the mean value of providing signal words ($Mean = 72.57 > Mean = 56.50$). Besides, the findings of this study also indicated that there was a significant difference between the effect of providing topic sentence and the effect of providing signal words on learner's writing proficiency which was proved by $p < 0.05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis, "there is no effect of different task variance that involves providing topic sentence and providing signal words on student's writing proficiency which covers complexity and coherence" was rejected.

Additionally, it is reasonable to say that the advantage of giving conditions such as providing topic sentences as a starting point of the paragraph writing and could guide language learners to continue their writing activity to a detail section. Also, the beneficial point of giving topic sentence is that the language

learners could catch or get ideas from the topic sentence that will be developed for further steps of writing a paragraph. In other words, providing topic sentences as a stimulus condition constitutes a powerful assistance for the language learners to be able to write a paragraph unity better than providing signal words. Theoretically, the results of the present study are in line with what Skehan (1996) said that when task-based instruction could be put into practice to minimize difficulties and give opportunities, the learners would achieve greater complexity structuring, accuracy, fluency, and accuracy. Similarly, Ellis and Yuan (2004) said that linguistic performance could probably be affected by the particular type of processing in which learners experienced. They also explained that the learners would draw their lexical knowledge of language under a certain condition.

In case of providing signal words, based on the results of this study, the condition only facilitated language learners to make smooth transitions among sentences in a paragraph unity. But the language learners still thought how to determine the best choice of the signal words that would be used for each sentence. They also got difficulties to start writing the paragraph. Consequently, the condition of providing signal words could not reach the effect as big as the effect of providing topic sentence on the language learner's writing proficiency.

For the complexity, we found that the current study did not only find out the effects of providing topic sentence [PTS] and providing signal words [PSW] on learner's writing proficiency in general, but it also found out the effects of PTS and PSW on specific components of complexity and coherence. The findings of this study indicated that PTS had higher level of effect on most of the components of complexity such as main clause, dependent clause, complex sentence, and t units. We predicted that the role of providing topic sentence was better than providing signal words in the case of guiding participants to construct main clause, dependent clause, complex sentence, and T unit. In other words, the conditions were helpful for the participants to develop paragraph writing.

On the other hand, the present study also indicated mixed results. PTS had a lower level of effect compared with the effect of PSW on few components of complexity such as simple sentence and compound sentence. We predicted that the participants of group II (PSW) tended to make simple sentences rather than complex sentences. In other words, we could say that PSW had bigger influences on writing simple sentences and compound sentences compared with PTS. These results supported the hypothesis stating that PTS had a higher level of effect on complexity than the effect of PSW on complexity. Mixed results happen to experimental studies and sometimes independent variables have positive or significant effects on a certain dependent variables and sometimes it does not have a significant effect. For example, the study conducted by Ellis and Yuan (2004) on the effect of conditions of a task on second language narrative had mixed results. They confirmed that every independent variable of the experimental study may have positive effect and it may have negative effect on dependent variable.

The findings of our study also indicated that there were the effects of PTS and PSW on components of coherence. Particularly, PTS had a higher level of effect on the coherence components such as connectors, key nouns, and pronouns than the effect of PSW on coherence. These findings were proved by the different values of mean, standard error, and values of $p < 0.05$. These results were in line with the results of former studies that showed the effects of task-based treatments on coherence (e.g. Castro, 2004; Lee, 2002; White & Rosenberg, 1993; Johnson, 1992). Moreover, the results of the study proved the hypothesis stating that providing topic sentence had a higher level of effect than the effect of providing signal words on coherence.

For the correlations between components of complexity, the statistical analysis showed that the components of complexity were related to each other. For example, main clauses had a positive correlation with the dependent clauses. Then, simple sentences had a negative correlation with the compound sentences. Finally, complex sentences had a positive relationship with the T-Units. This analysis aimed to see how the components of complexity were related to each other. Knowing these relationships means that we tried to see how the participants expressed their ideas structurally. In other words, we could say that the participants' ability to use any types of sentence levels increased.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study may have some limitations. First, although the results of this study may give us evidence on the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency from a non-English speaking country, the small sample size may prevent us to generalize the findings of the study. Future research may include a larger sample size. Also, this study used the experimental design; future researchers could use a mixed methods study (questionnaire and interviews) to collect data from student teachers. Last, teachers or lecturers were not part of this study, so through qualitative research designs, future research could include teachers or lecturers' perspectives on the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency.

CONCLUSION

Although conclusions are limited by the small sample size, this study provides us an understanding of the effect of the different task variance involving providing topic sentences and signal words on student teacher's writing proficiency from a non-English speaking country. Particularly, providing topic sentence helps students much better to develop paragraph writing than providing signal words. The conditions involving providing topic sentence contribute to three beneficial points which have powerful functions for the EFL learners in developing paragraph writing. For example, the topic sentence functions as a guide for participants to start and to continue writing a paragraph. Then, it is economical for the use of time to think how to start the paragraph writing. These functions can influence or stimulate language learners to write quickly and directly. Therefore, in general, the condition of providing topic sentence had a higher level of effect on learner's writing proficiency, on complexity, and on coherence than the effect of condition of providing signal words on writing proficiency, complexity, and coherence. Furthermore, the interactions among the components of complexity have strong correlation. Moreover, the statistical analysis also indicated the positive relationships among the components of coherence.

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