STUDENTS' COMPETENCE IN WRITING A DISCUSSION GENRE

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ABSTRACT

This research has the students' difficulties in writing a Discussion genre as its background. Meanwhile, the draft of the 2004 English curriculum suggests that the teaching of writing to senior high school students should be enhanced. This research was intended to investigate the students' competence in writing a *Discussion genre*, a text type in English. This research was conducted in two phases at one senior high school in Rokan Hulu, Riau province. There were nine participants involved in this study. They were all from the twelfth year. This research was a qualitative case study in nature, since it dealt with a holistic description and text analysis. The procedures used to collect data were observation, interview, and writing test. For analysing students' texts, Systemic functional grammar (SFG) was used as a tool. The findings revealed that the students develop their competence in writing a Discussion genre quite slowly. Their writing development started from recognizing a Discussion genre through its schematic structure, linguistic features, and metaphorical expressions. Next, they understood how to develop arguments in argument stages. They have used some linguistic features, such as *one of the most controversial issues, the proponents of, the opponents of, in conclusion* in their Discussion genre texts. This indicates that they have tried to produce coherent texts, particularly in terms of generic coherence. In terms of building internal properties of the text, one student had used good structural Themes. Finally, there was an improvement in self-confidence, as marked by the ability to produce longer texts, which averagely contain 408 words. Meanwhile in terms of weaknesses, the students still got problems dealing with grammatical patterns, cohesion, coherence, and dictions to support the clarity and effectiveness of sentences. They also had difficulties in developing arguments with convincing evidence. After looking at the findings above, the researcher believes that the teaching cycles as suggested in Genre-based approach are still possible to be adopted in the teaching of writing, particularly the Discussion genre. Finally, realizing that this research is far from perfect, the writer invites all concerned people to do similar research to improve the quality of the findings in this study.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is any kind of tool people use to "communicate information or ideas" (Oluwadiya, 1995), and in which a writer is required to think about "the stages of writing" and where writing fits in with his/her individual plans, strengths, and weaknesses (White, 2001). This implies that a writer should apply relevant steps or stages in presenting his/her ideas so that readers will feel easy to follow every chunk of information given in the writing or text. Texts can be identified by analyzing their schematic structures (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993:8). These text variations are called the genres of the text (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; Eggins, 1994; Gerot and Wignell, 1994; Feez and Joyce, 1998; Johns, 2002).

There are many kinds of text types in Genre based approaches. One of those is a Discussion. Through writing a Discussion, students are encouraged to provide their arguments with evidence and supporting information, using various linguistic resources to convince others (readers). This is in line with the suggestion from Feez and Joyce (1998: 140) who state that when we write a Discussion, we should give factual and evident information.

According to Alwasilah (2005:17), a school or university can be classified as qualified or unqualified by referring to its "writing production or citations". It means that the writing activities can serve to enhance the qualification of a school or university. This indicates that writing activities are indicators that should be seen as one of school potential sources to be developed for the shake of fulfilling the students'

needs. In other words, writing plays a very important role to promote the school to public, nationally or even internationally.

As the objectives of the draft of the 2004 English curriculum for Senior High Schools suggest, the students' competence should be shifted from oral perspectives into written ones (Depdiknas, 2003). It means that students should be made capable of writing academically. To do so, English teachers, students, and the surroundings should be hand in hand to realize this purpose. Teachers should be capable of doing their jobs professionally. Students have to be able to apply the knowledge of writing they got. Surroundings (headmaster, administrating staffs, school environment, etc.) should give supports to those activities according to their capacity. If those parts play their roles as optimally as possible, the writing as "the making sense of life", (Gordimer in White, 2001:269) will be actualized. In addition, writing will make life more social and meaningful in representing the sharing between the writers and readers, as suggested by Feez and Joyce (1998), Gerot and Wignell (1994), Eggins (1994). In the context of writing as representation of the writers to readers, Alwasilah (2005:42) states that writing will take part in showing the students' ability, mastery, and smartness of conveying ideas into discourse, which will be accepted by heterogeneous readers both intellectually and socially. Finally, writing is a process of training to "get your self-organized" (White, 2001: 61).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was aimed at describing the students' ways of developing skills in writing a *Discussion genre* in the writing class session. Secondly, this research was intended to investigate the students' strengths and weaknesses in writing a *Discussion genre* as reflected by their writing products. There were two questions in this research

1. How do the participants develop skills in writing a *Discussion genre*?
2. What are the participants' strengths and weaknesses in writing a *discussion genre* as reflected in their writing products?

The research methodology comprises the research settings, participants, and designs. This methodology also displays the data collection techniques, which includes observation, interview, and documentation of students' texts.

This research was conducted at *SMA Rohul (pseudonym)*, one of senior high schools in *Rokan Hulu regency, Riau Province*. This school was chosen for some reasons. First of all, this school is the school in which the researcher is as one of the teaching staffs.

In this study, there were three techniques of collecting data: interviewing, observing, and analysing texts, and each of them served to provide information, which will be used to answer the addressed questions in this research. Observation is a fundamental thing to assess human skills and behaviors (Genesee and Upshur, 1996:77). The observations in this research were conducted in two cycles. The first cycle was in the first phase of research activities. Mrs. Inur (pseudonym), acted as a collaborator in the study and also she is an English teacher at this school. The second cycle of observation was conducted in the second phase of research activities, where it lasted for 10 hours, which is equal to 13 meetings. In interview, firstly, the researcher could propose follow-up questions if the information that has been gathered needs *in-depth information* from the interviewee (see Alwasilah, 2000:154). Secondly, through interviewing, interviewer could provide a chance for the interviewees to tell something about what happened in the past and in the progress and might happen in the future because the interviewees themselves have been experiencing the learning situation so far. Documentation of Students' texts was another way of gathering data. It was everything that the students had written and filmed and is not on behalf of the request from the researcher as stated by Alwasilah (2002:155) and as to comply with Merriam (1998: 112). Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) was the tool for analyzing students written texts.

Figure 1. The Metafunctions of texts

Metafunctions	IDEATIONAL **(Transitivity)** *FIELD*	INTERPERSONAL **(Mood)** *TENOR*	TEXTUAL **(Theme)** *MODE*
Action		❖	
Identification			❖
Representation	❖		

A. The MOOD System

Figure 2. The Mood elements

MOOD	Residue

MOOD		Residue		
Subject	Finite	Predicator	Complement	Circumstance

B.   The TRANSITIVITY System

Transitivity deals with the talking about the clause as representation

(Gerot and Wignell, 1994: 52; Goatly, 2000:59).

Figure 3. The elements of Transitivity

Participant	Process

Participant	Process	Circumstance

Participant: Actor	**Processes:** Material; verbal; mental; behavioral; relational; existential, and meteorological.	**Participant:** Goal
Participant: Goal	**Process:** Material, verbal, mental, behavioral, relational, existential, and meteorological.	**Participant:** Actor

In material processes, there are Actor, Goal, Range, and Beneficiary. The following is the process types.

Figure 4. The summary of the elements in Process type

Clause	material: pr: material; +Actor;+(Goal)(+Range)(+Beneficiary)
	mental: pr: mental; +Senser; +Phenomena
	verbal: pr: verbal; +Sayer; (+Receiver)(+Verbiage)
	behavioral: pr: behavioral; +Behaver; (+Behaviour) (Phenomena)
	existential: pr: existential; +Existent
	relational: identifying: pr: identifying; +Token; Value attributive: pr: attributive;+Carrier;+Attribute

		circumstance + Circumstance
		Not

<div align="right">Adapted from (Eggins, 1994: 228)</div>

C. The THEME System

In the Theme analysis, we would look at topic sentence as the Theme of the paragraph. The Theme system is realized through a structure in which the clause is divided into two main constituents: *Theme* and *Rheme*.

A. Unmarked Topical Themes

1. Nominal group as Theme   2. Nominal group complex as Theme

Budi	**went to school**	**Budi and Imran**	**went to school**
Theme	**Rheme**	**Theme**	**Rheme**

3. Embedded Clause

((What Budi and Imran did))	**was go to school**
Theme	**Rheme**

B. Marked Topical Themes

1. Adverbial as Theme   2. Preposition phrase as Theme

Carefully	he walks	In the field	they played football
Theme	Rheme	Theme	Rheme

2. Complement as Theme

The novel	he bought
Theme	Rheme

Figure 3.8. The figure of Lexico-grammar, discourse-semantics and context
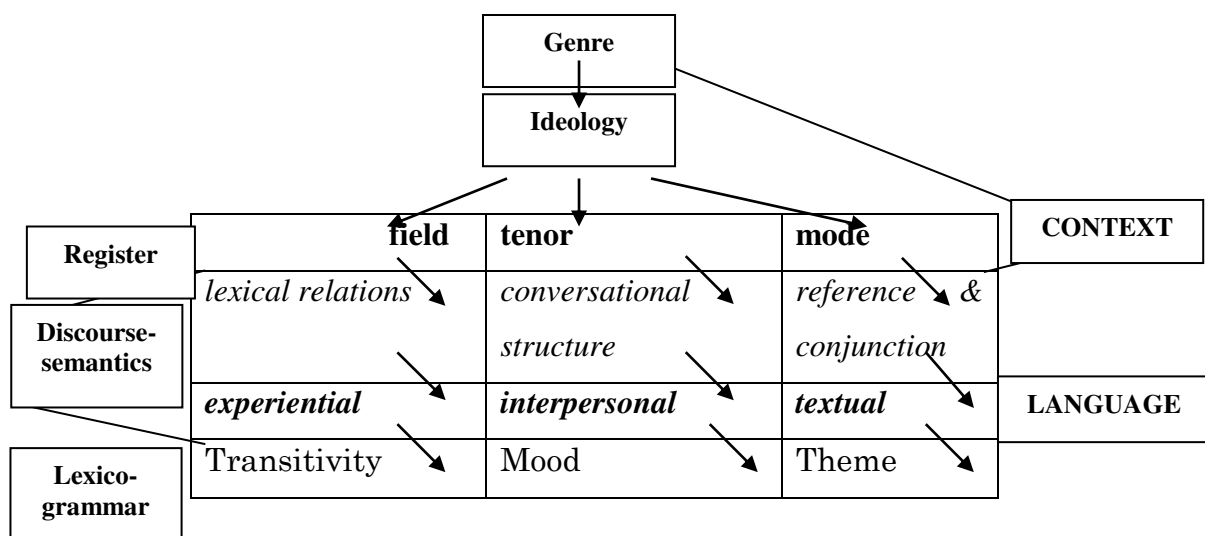
<div align="right">Adapted from Eggins (1994:113)</div>

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Data from observation

At the beginning of this research, the students felt doubtful about what genre is. As indicated by the students' question "*What is genre, sir?*" This might be happened due to the ineffectiveness of applying "Modeling cycles" in the teaching practice. Until this research was conducted, the students still had problem in the basic knowledge.

In observation O1 through O3, there were also many mispronouncing words and ungrammatical expressions heard in this class. Such as listed below:

Problems	Samples:
Misspelled word	Controvery
Ungrammatical Sentences	He has been to be a teacher....
	There is two side...
	It is many years ago...
	Soeharto must take to jail
	...last month ago...
Mispronounced words:	genre /jangre/
	against /ejent/
	current /kyurent/
	manage /ma'neij/

In observation III, the students acknowledged that they started to understand how to write a Discussion genre. One of the students' expressions is *Oh, If it is so, may I understand how to write a Discussion genre gradually.* However, since the absence of practicing writing during the three times of observation, a significant development in students' writing was not so evident.

As comparison to what the researcher had found, Mrs. Inur, a colleague teacher at the school, was willing to help do three times of observation (O4, O5, and O6) towards Mr. Ryan's. From the three times of observation done by Mrs. Inur, it can be concluded that the teaching processes conducted by Pak Ryan was not very far different from what the researcher had observed. However, according to Mrs. Inur's observations, Pak Ryan had implemented a practice of writing in the classroom activities. The questions arisen during the three periods of observation were as follows: *1) what is the social function of Discussion? 2) What is the generic structure of Discussion? 3) What are the kinds of this text? 4) What for is this text?* The development in writing a Discussion genre the students could perform during the three times of observations was about the appearances of students' motivation to write whatever they could write about a Discussion genre. Concerning writing development, there was no specific development shown by students (Mrs. Inur's observation).

Next, the researcher did the teaching processes to students. There were three titles offered to students to choose at that time: 1) *Should Indonesian government legalize death penalty? 2) Should Indonesian government import military weapons from other countries? 3) Should Indonesian government provide Indonesian students with fee-free schools?* However, after these stages were over, the result was not very

satisfied. The students did not really have evident competence to write the preview of the issue. However, comparing to the previous ones, they have made developments a step a head. The students' developments in writing were: 1) they had implemented some process types such as *say*, *believe*, *think*, and *argue*. 2) They also had used some linguistic features of *On the one hand*, *on the other hand*, *the opposition of*, and *the proposition of* [re-write: the proponents of]. Unfortunately, their writing of arguments was still in the form of listing. The arguments, though, had been elaborated; they seemed unsuccessfully to "sway the readers' point of view" (Feez and Joyce, 1998). This is because the elaboration they had made lacked the coherence of ideas, particularly the situational coherence: field, mode, and tenor (Eggins, 1994:23). However, the students have applied the generic coherence of the text, such as the use of schematic structure of the texts.

During observation 7, the students seemed to try to apply those competences they have got so far. It was proved by their seriousness to write their texts as optimally as possible. They had shown the use of more than one arguments in the argument stages, the process of elaborating, extending, and enhancing of the arguments, as well as the use of metaphorical expressions such as *I believe, I think, I am in the opinion that*, etc. Finally, in recommendation, they also had shown a strong assertion of opinion, such as in "*After looking at both sides of the debate, I believe...*" (text written by Harti).

2. The students' strengths and weaknesses in writing a Discussion genre

    Overall, the situation of classroom can be categorized conducive to teaching and learning process, since the students followed the classroom activities seriously and enthusiastically. Their strengths and weaknesses during the observations were among others, 1) the students were able to apply the conventional schematic structure of a Discussion genre, use some linguistic features, conjunction, transition, process types, use a macro-theme (see final texts written by Ilda and Yani). 2) the students have used more than one argument in the argument stages and have used the process of elaborating, extending, and enhancing. 3) they have used good structural themes, such as in the text written by Ilda. 4) the students have also used metaphorical expressions such as *I believe, I think, I am in the opinion that*, etc., 5) the students have shown a strong assertion of opinion in recommending one point of view, enclosed reference in the texts, used hypotactic and paratactic clauses. 6) The students have used various themes in their texts: marked and unmarked, and used projection sentences. Take a look at the following interview:

Interviewer: "*In your opinion, can the teacher's explanation enhance your understanding about writing a Discussion genre?*"

Interviewee: "*Yes, it can*".

This dialogue shows that the teaching, particularly Modeling cycle, conducted by the teacher has resulted a good understanding of writing a Discussion genre for the students.

Though they felt pleased to write a Discussion genre, they admitted that writing was a difficult activity to do (five out the nine participants). This is natural, because not only students but

also experts admit that this activity is a "difficult activity" (White, 2001:123) to do. However, two students claimed that writing was not so difficult to do. It means that the students still have optimistic feeling that they could write in English, particularly writing a Discussion genre. This fact should be followed up by explicitly teaching students how to write a Discussion genre. One of the strategies is by implementing the teaching cycles adopted from Feez and Joyce cited in Johns (2002:65) and Rothery as cited in Agustien (2006). Finally, two students stated undecided about writing activities. This indication suggests that the teaching of writing to students should be able to build and enhance their self-confidence. This can be done through the processes of building knowledge of the field, giving model texts or Modeling, "collaborating" (Alwasilah, 2005) with classmates or Joint construction of the text. Joint construction of the text serves to consolidate opinions among students. Therefore, there is mutual assistance and take and give among the group members. After understanding what to write in every stages of a Discussion genre, the students will have self-confidence with them. After having self-confidence in them, the possibility to ask the students to write individually in the Independent construction of the text will be more logical.

Regarding the efforts to enhance students' writing competence, all of the participants of this research stated that writing activities in their school were very poor, as expressed to answer the question "*How were the writing activities at your school?*" Nasut: "*rarely*", Dol: "*less active*", Kim: "*not very often done*", Ilda: "*sometimes done*", etc. Their responses indicate that writing was not priority at their school yet. Meanwhile, the draft of the 2004 English curriculum suggests that in Senior High schools the continuum from spoken language is changed into written language. It is because the students are prepared for studying at universities, in which competences in academic writing are much needed. In addition, two of the participants even claimed that English writing activities in their school were almost nil, as in "*Probably, it can be said never*" (Harti and Febri).

2.1. Analysis of Diagnostic text 4.1 (written by Ilda)

Total of words   : 324, Paragraphs: 8, Lines : 33

Should Logging be legalized in Indonesia?

Preview of Issue
1. Emerald equator is The Indonesian Name
2. because most of <u>this</u> areas are covered with forests.
3. But now <u>it</u> becomes one of the most controversial issues in this country
4. because some people believe
5. that <u>this</u> vital part should be kept.
6. On the other side Indonesians should log <u>it</u> as their own livelihood.
Arguments in favor
7. On the one hand, the logging will make despair to Indonesians

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8. while as Indonesians they have right [[to log it]]

9. because <u>it inheritance</u> from their ances<u>tor</u>.

10. Then logging forest is one of Indonesians jobs.

11. If government doesn't legalize this,

12. most of Indonesians will not live well

13. because they loose their job.

Argument against

14. The opposition of logging say

15. that it can make green house effect become quickly to be happened from what is imagined and analyzed by experts in this world

15. Next they point out

16. that in 2040, many cities in this world [[which are close to the sea such as Jakarta which is known by "The Bay City" might be sunk]].

16. How dangerous it is!

17. Furthermore, in this time, we agree

18. that not only on September, October, November, and December we get rain but also on January until august.

18. It means,

19. the climate is changing

20. and the effect is flooding everywhere.

21. In addition to <u>Geophsicist</u> and meteorology organization of Indonesia explains [[that on January, February, March in this year, people will be busy because of flooding]].

22. More over, if this case is legalized by government

23. of course the function of forest <u>in absorb</u> carb<u>ondio</u>xide and produce oxygen will not work effectively

24. because forest is logged by people.

Conclusion or Recommendation

25. Although logging can support Indonesian daily life,

26. it also threatens some sides in this world.

27. After looking <u>at both of this debate</u>,

28. I am in the opinion

29. that the government of Indonesia should not legalize this action

30. because of some arguments above

31. and Indonesians [[who are getting job from logging forest]] can look for <u>another job</u> [[which <u>aren't threaten</u> this world]].

2.2. The schematic Structure, Organisation and Purpose of Text 4.1

Text 4.1 was written in one sitting after nine meetings of teaching and learning processes. It was written by Ilda, a student from the highest group. There was no revision given to this text. This text displays an issue about whether Indonesian government should legalize logging in Indonesia. Two controversial issues completed this issue. Therefore, this text has fulfilled a social function of a Discussion genre that is to present at least two points of view about the issue (Gerot and Wignell, 1994; Feez and Joyce, 1998). The schematic structure of this text implies that the text has the essential elements of a Discussion genre: the Issue stage, Argument for stage, Arguments against stage, and Conclusion or Recommendation stage

(Feez and Joyce, 1994:140 and Gerot and Wignell, 1994:214). Therefore, the writer has fulfilled the criteria of a Discussion genre, all at once; it shows her writing skill in a Discussion genre.

• **Preview of the issue**: presents the issue and describes controversy about logging. This paragraph play role as an introductory since the two controversial opinions and a little background of the issue are presented (Feez and Joyce, 1994: 140). There is no signal to indicate its function as a Macro-Theme (Martin, 1992:437) that can predict the hyper-Themes in this text.

• **Arguments in favor:** provides arguments for the issue in order to "persuade the readers to accept a particular position on an issue" (Feez and Joyce, 1998:137). This is introduced by the linguistic feature of the text, as in *On the one hand, the logging will make despair to Indonesians...*, which indicates the writer's starting point to present her argumentation for the issue. However, the ideas are not developed well, due to less grammatical sentences. And the number of argument is only one.

Therefore, this argument cannot optimally do the function of arguing for an issue.

• **Arguments against:** presents arguments against the issue of logging. The linguistic feature introduces found such as "*The opposition of logging say*... indicating the starting point to argue against the issue by using the opposite opinion to the previous arguments (Feez and Joyce, 1998: 140). It is marked by nominalization "*The proposition*".

• **Conclusion or Recommendation:** presents the writer's restatement of information produced in the debate (White, 2001: 194). The writer has also implemented a strong assertion of opinion as indicated by "*After looking at both of this debate,...*" Unfortunately, this expression is not clear, as in "*at both of this debate*" The writer has also uses metaphorical expression "*I am in the opinion that...*" showing a gradual development in writing. However, the writer of this text does not mention explicitly the reasons why the issue is opposed or supported. It means the restatement process in this stage is not clearly done.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

5.1 Conclusion

Regarding the findings of the research and considering the relevant theories, the students' competence development in fact ran very slowly. In other words, they wrote a Discussion genre from scratch. Generally, the students' development in writing a Discussion genre ranges from here and now principles to describing or defining actions. The domination of action processes were very significant unlike intensive processes.

With regard to the students' strengths and weaknesses, the students already have some abilities in writing a Discussion genre. Their strengths are to do with the ability to apply the conventional schematic structure of a Discussion genre, to use some linguistic features, conjunction, and transition, process types; to use more than one argument in the argument stages as well as to use the process of elaborating, extending, and enhancing. However, their competences have just been at the beginning level.

5.2. Suggestion or Recommendation

After looking at both the strengths and weaknesses the students have made in their writing a Discussion genre, the researcher believes that one of the tips is by providing them with sufficient sources about the issue. The second one is by teaching them seriously, particularly in the building knowledge of the field and Modeling. The third one is by making writing as their habits. The last teaching writing should be doing writing itself not by giving theories.

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