

Students' Problems in Personal Letter Writing: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract—The 2013 English curriculum for high school demands students to write a personal letter in English to improve their writing ability. However, some students met some difficulties in writing a personal letter. This study investigated the students' problems in writing a personal letter based on three metafunctions in the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) perspective. A qualitative case study was employed to analyze the use of three metafunctions of fifteen students of senior high school in writing personal letters. The results of the study reveal that the students' major problems in producing personal letters were the disappearance of one aspect of interpersonal metafunction namely subject and finite, resulting in incomplete clauses and sentences to deliver the idea completely. Other results show that students tended to use the same verb that refers to mental processes on experiential metafunction that only described the writer's point of view, causing the self-focused personal letters whereas personal letter is aimed to strengthen the relationship between writer and reader. The study recommends that the teaching of interpersonal metafunction in terms of subject and finite, and the various expressions of processes need to be explicitly delivered.

Keywords: *EFL, metafunction, personal letter, Systemic Functional Linguistic*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of many variations of text genre is a personal letter, it is the most basic type of written language communication (Barton & Hall, 2000). Moreover, personal letters are often purposed to deliver news, to keep a social relationship, and to achieve a particular conversation purpose associated with specific occasions (Crane, 2016). Therefore, the specific communicative goals adopted by letters often relate to the relationship construction for both the writer and the reader. In line with this, the personal letter becomes one of the genres of text which can be found in the 2013 curriculum. In the curriculum, students should be able to identify the social function of a personal letter, its generic structure, linguistic features, and construct the text by themselves.

Meanwhile, personal letters still receive a few attentions in the field of linguistics and research (Barton & Hall, 2000) since the personal letters only emphasize the relationships between writer and reader as well as they usually used in everyday conversation. Thus, many researchers argue that personal letter

orientation is only evaluating and positioning of the two participants and their immediate world that is the position between the writer and the reader (Ahearn, 2000; Fitzmaurice, 2002). However, in the educational field, Knutson (2012) and Kearney (2012) declare that personal letters can provide teachers with a useful tool to engage students in identifying and empathizing with different subject positions or reader-writer relationship.

Besides, relating to the topic of the personal letter and the systemic functional analysis of it, several previous studies were written in this section. The study conducted by Besnier (1989) and Vetter (1991) focused on how effective aspects encoded in letters written by Nukulaelae and Tuvulan people since they utilized a letter or especially personal letters as the major link between them and other people in the world. The result of his study showed that the letters written by them contained affective aspects on several levels, both the topic and context that they address in their letter.

Further, two related studies in the SFL analysis field will be presented. The first study was conducted by Crane (2016), the author concerned with fostering foreign language teachers in understanding and evaluating the personal letter as one of the text genres. Further, the author believed that teachers' knowledge of genre might help them in supporting their students in improving their literacy abilities. The second study was presented by Mortensen (2005), he selected several unique participants, namely participants who experienced aphasia, they who had a cognitive language disorder, and normal participants. The results showed that participants who suffered aphasia had difficulties expressing ideational functions and paying less attention to interpersonal functions. Meanwhile, they who suffer the cognitive language disorder have problems with the semantic aspects of their writing, and the normal participants showed that their age, education, and individual value reflected the different quality of personal letter writing. Those two studies have different concertation in analyzing the personal letter based on the SFL concept; on the other hand, we can relate the studies as the exposure of our knowledge as teachers.

Responding to the recent gap, this paper tries to identify writers' specific linguistic resources in communicating a particular message in personal letter writing based on the

Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) perspective. SFL provides the theory of how grammatical choices affect individual relationships, communication topics, and modes through individual interaction (Thompson, 2004). Moreover, this research also tries to provide the pedagogical recommendation for the teacher that might help them conducting the teaching and learning practices.

Based on the description above, this study is directed to answer two research questions as stated below.

1. What problems are commonly found in students' writing of personal letter text based on the nature of the personal letter and SFL perspective analysis?
2. What kind of pedagogical recommendation is to be proposed to resolve students' problems in personal letter text writing?

A. *The Nature of Personal Letter*

A personal letter is a type of letter in an informal organization that particularly concern with individual substance rather than professional substance. It is aimed to strengthen a relationship between writer and reader, spread the good news, share a mutual sense of belonging, and it reflects the common interests and beliefs between the writers. Besides, most personal letters have a specific form that is tailored to the situation and relationship between the writers (Shepherd & Hogan, 2008).

In general, the potential generic structure of a personal letter was established by Hasan (1996), he included both common elements of the letter writing. Furthermore, there are mandatory and optional elements of a personal letter. Mandatory elements such as an address, date, greetings, information (news), and resignation. Optional elements include frame and leave-taking (Hasan, 1996; English Plus, 2007).

B. *Personal Letter in SFL Perspective*

In systemic functional linguistics, the personal letter can be analyzed by using interpersonal metafunction that emphasizes the relationship between writer and reader, their social level, age, and their power; experiential metafunction to see how language is used to interpret the meaning, the individual's motive and the idea in social settings; and textual metafunction that focus on what the message is concerned with (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yallop, 2000/2006; Eggins, 2004; Halliday, Matthiessen, Halliday, 2014; Thompson, 2004).

- Personal Text in Interpersonal Metafunction

Interacting with other people, maintaining good personal and social links with them are the main purposes of communication in interpersonal meaning. Further, there are four fundamental speech roles, namely declarative, interrogative, imperative, and offer. In line with the purpose of interpersonal metafunction, the personal letter has the same purpose, those are strengthening a relationship and sharing information. Therefore, the declarative form is commonly used in personal letter writing and the clause or sentence is usually reflected its purpose to strengthen people's relationship.

Interpersonal metafunction is constructed by the Mood system. The Mood is the combination of Subject and Finite. The subject is called a nominal group. Moreover, the finite is acquired from verbal operators such as those which express tense and modality. In personal letter text, the subject 'I' become the most used subject, since it shows the strong relationship between the sender. Furthermore, the present tense is the commonly used tense in a personal letter, however, other kinds of tenses can be applied since the personal letter has tense flexibility based on the writer's need. A sentence also has a residue or clause that is not part of the Mood. Predicator, adjunct, and complement are three types of residue (Butt et al, 2000/2006; Eggins, 2004; Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Thompson, 2004).

- Personal Text in Experiential Metafunction

In describing the ideational/experiential metafunction, Butt et al (2000/2006) explain that we need to use a group of terms to present the three constituents of the sentence, namely participant, circumstances, and processes. The participant constituent differentiates the role of the participant in a sentence. The circumstance presents the functional distinctions in the sentence. The last term is processes, the process signs by the existence of a verbal group. There are six major types of processes. First, the material process represents the activity of doing something. Second, the mental process that functions to describe something in our mind. The third is the verbal process, it shows the verb of saying. Fourth, the behavioral processes that describe conscious behavior. The fifth is the existential process that signs the existence of something. The last one is the relational process; it links the participant to the identity or description (Butt et al, 2000/2006; Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Thompson, 2004;).

Since the personal letter is mainly talking about the experience between two people, it deals with action and reaction. Those six processes are probably written in a personal letter. However, the personal letter may mostly consist of material processes like telling the reader about what the writer has done in his/her holiday and mental processes like telling the reader about the writer's expectation and desire.

- Personal Letter in Textual Metafunction

Textual meanings are built upon three kinds of ways, namely repetition, thematization, and conjunction (Thompson, 2004). The function of repetition is to show that there is a relation between the part of the text. It is different from thematization. Thematization is related to the structuring of the clause. Conjunction works between two or more clauses and it performs like a repetition which tries to recall what the writer has expressed before. Butt, et al (2000/2006) expressed a rather different perspective about the theme. The theme is the initial point of the sentence or clause. It gives the focus of the sentence. There are three types of theme, those are the topical theme, textual theme, and interpersonal theme (Butt, et al, 2000/2006; Thompson, 2004). In personal letter text, the topical theme, since the subject 'I' which is a nominal group that acts as the first participant, process, or circumstance, and it usually appears on the first clause or sentence.

II. METHOD

This section elaborates on the methodology of this research. It covers research design, research site and participants, data collection, and data analysis.

A. Research Design

The present study concern with exploring common problems found in students' letter text based on the nature of the personal letter and SFL perspective analysis and identifying pedagogical recommendation. Concerning it, this research a qualitative case study design is employed (Yin, 2003). According to Malik & Hamied (2014), a qualitative case study design is beneficial to answer the questions that relate to a social phenomenon comprehensively.

B. Research Site and Participant

The sample of text was deliberately chosen from fifteen students from the second grade of Senior High School in Garut, West Java, Indonesia. The school is located in a suburb area in Garut that has a limitation on teaching-learning media and the teachers only focus on the use of the textbook. Further, the samples of text were chosen because those reflected and represented the problems faced by students in writing the personal letter text.

C. Data Collection and Data Analysis

In data collection, this study utilized school observation and students' letter text writing. Moreover, to analyze the students' errors in personal letter text writing, the content analysis approach was used. Students' writing analysis included several processes namely, observing, analyzing and interpreting

At first, students' texts were read one by one and observed. Then, the SFL theory relating to the three language metafunctions was used to analyze the texts. Furthermore, students' texts were also analyzed in terms of their suitability with the social function, generic structure, and lexicogrammatical features that were commonly found on a personal text. In the last step, the analysis results were interpreted and categorized based on the type of error found. As a result, a comprehensive analysis was conducted based on the three language metafunctions on SFL perspective theory and personal letter content analysis.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The sections concern with the analysis of students' texts based on the SFL perspective, namely interpersonal metafunction, experiential metafunction, textual metafunction, and the personal letter text genre analysis.

A. Personal Letter in Metafunction Perspectives

The Systemic Functional Linguistic theory concern with three general functions of language, namely interpersonal metafunction, experiential metafunction, and textual metafunction (Butt, et al, 2000/2006; Eggins, 2004; Halliday, Matthiessen, Halliday, 2014; Thompson, 2004). These three metafunctions will affect texts to achieve social objectives.

• Interpersonal Metafunction

This metafunction concerns how to establish a relationship between people who involved in communication. There are four fundamental speech roles in interpersonal metafunction. The students' letter writing, commonly use declarative sentences to express the expectation of their future holiday with their friends and to express their holiday experiences. Moreover, all students also use the interrogative sentence to ask about his friend's condition. These relate to the common form of the personal letter, which is generally written in declarative and interrogative sentences.

The result of the MOOD analysis from students' writing of personal letters showed that the pronoun "I" become the most used pronoun as the subject. Moreover, the use of the pronoun "we" is only found in one sentence. However, some sentences are also indicated to have no subject as follows:

1., and now want hat time to happen again.
2. ... but confused about where to go.
3. Many unforgettable events.

Moreover, Finite is another constituent of mood analysis. A personal letter is written using a simple present tense and/or it can be as flexible as the author's purpose. From fifteen samples of students' texts, the majority of students use simple present tense and they also use other types of tenses, especially past tense.

Besides, some sentences of the students' texts can be included in the incomplete or ungrammatical sentences since they do not use Finite and Predicator.

Sample 1: (No Finite)

My coming week	at school holiday,
Subject	Circ. Adjunct
RESIDUE	

Sample 2: (No Predicator)

I	will	(spend)	holiday in Garut.
Subject	Finite	(Predicator)	Complement
MOOD			RESIDUE

Moreover, interpersonal metafunction also analyzed the term modality. The result shows that most of the students tend to use *modal operators*: *will* and *can* in constructing their sentences, below are some samples of students' sentences.

• Experiential Metafunction

The experiential or ideational metafunction analysis focuses on the communication that shows the experience or idea to present what is going on. According to Butt, et al (2000/2006), the description of the ideational or experiential metafunction needs to use a group of terms to present the three constituents

of the sentence, namely participant, processes, and circumstances.

Since the personal letter includes the informal writing form, it can use the various types of processes. However, almost all students in this study use mental processes as the main process, especially the mental process of desiderative or wanting something. They tried to inform readers about their expectations of the activities they want to do on their holiday. The examples of the mental process written in the text are as follow:

Sample 1:

How	are	you?
Circ: Quality	Pr: Mental	Senser

Sample 2:

I	want	to stay in your house.
Senser	Pr: Mental	Circ: Purpose

- **Textual Metafunction**

This metafunction informs about the idea that the writer tries to describe in a text. The analysis focus on the term thematization. It relates to the clause structure, it can be analyzed by using Theme and Rheme. Furthermore, topical, textual, and interpersonal are three types of themes. The analysis of Theme in the students' letter writing, shows that they almost use the topical theme, especially the pronoun "I", the sample of students' text can be seen in the tables below.

Sample 1:

I	want to spend my holiday in Garut with you.
Theme: topical	Rheme

Sample 2:

I	want to meet you.
Theme: topical	Rheme

Some of the students seem to face difficulties to connect one sentence to another one. Furthermore, in the term of thematic progression, ten from fifteen students showed reiteration pattern for their thematic progression and the rest of the texts showed the zigzag pattern. Moreover, there is no text out of the topic.

Sample 1: (re-iteration)

I want to spend my holiday in Garut with you.
↓

I want to take a vacation to Pameungpeuk beach.



I miss the atmosphere of Garut, ...



I hope you can tell me about your destination ...

Sample 2: (zig-zag pattern)

I am waiting for the **holiday**.



After coming **holiday**, I will go to your **home**.



At your **home**, I will spend all day on a **holiday**.



On this **holiday**, can I visit your home?

B. *The Social Function, Generic structure, Mechanics of Writing, and Grammatical Error Analysis*

This section concern with the analysis of text's features, it consists of the social function of a personal letter, the generic structure of a personal letter, mechanics of writing, and grammatical errors.

- **Social Function**

Based on the purpose of the personal letter on the nature of the personal letter, the analysis result reveals that all students have understood the social function of personal text. It can be seen from their works; they show a good flow of conversation in sharing their holiday experiences with the one who accepts the letter. Their writings also reflect the strong relationship between the sender and the accepter of the letter, it shows that they have already known each other.

- **Generic Structures of Recount Text**

The generic structure of Personal Letter based on English Plus (2007), personal letters, friendly letters, or social notes commonly have five sections. Based on the analysis of students' text, there are some students miss the element of generic structure:

Sample 1:

(no date and address)	Heading
Dear Dara	Greeting
Hi,	
How are you? I am very fine here. ...	Body

Wait for coming into my home.	Complimentary close
Happy Enjoy ☺	
Wilda Hayati	The signature line

From the students' text above, the **heading** elements are uncompleted, the students did not write the address and the date of the letter. Sample 2:

February 28 th , 2019 (no address)	Heading
Dear Selsa Nur	Greeting
Hello, how are you? I hope you are always fine, ...	Body
(no complimentary close)	Complimentary close
Your best friend, Intan Kayfa	The signature line

From the students' text above, the student also misses one element on **heading** that is the address. Moreover, the **greeting** part is included in the body of the letter, and she chose to dismiss the **complimentary close**.

Based on generic structure analysis, twelve students deal with the same problem as the first sample of text, and the rest of them deal with the problem showed in the second sample and only one student who misses the signature line element. The missing part can be caused by some possible issues like they copied each other's text or their teacher gave only one reference as the example of a personal letter, or it might be other possible issues that cannot be found out.

• Lexico-grammatical Features

Writing's Mechanics

The term writing's mechanics define as the technical elements in writing such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Some errors were found in students' letter writing, in terms of it, some samples of students' errors are listed below.

1. Capitalization

Sample 1: Hi opi, How are you?

Sample 2: Hi! how are you?

The sentences above present that the students did not write the name of a person in the capital letter and after the full stop sign or exclamation mark (.). Moreover, the student writes the word How in the capital letter while it is located in the middle of the sentence and after the comma (,).

2. Punctuation

Sample 1: Also [,] if I don't mind...

Sample 2: Hi Imas [,] how are you?

It is found that to mark a slight break, the student did not use the comma (,) between certain parts of the sentences.

Moreover, the problem also caused by students' direct translation from Indonesian to English. The sample of students Direct Indonesian- English Translation is written below:

Sample 1:

Ss text : We've not met for a long time, so miss hehe...

However, it is better to write: We have not met for a long time, I miss you so much.

Sample 2:

Ss text : The morning we go to the market to buy kitchen ingredients.

The student should write: The next morning, we went to the market to buy some ingredients.

This phenomenon happens because students have a limitation in their English vocabulary.

Grammatical Errors

Delivering the meaning to the readers will be easier if the text is well-produced text and grammatically correct. Students' letter texts are indicated to have some grammatical errors. The grammatical errors analyzed in the text include the missing elements of tenses, the subject, and predicate. Some samples of the grammatical errors made by students in the text are:

Sample 1: (no verb/ to be/ predictor)

My coming week at school holiday [My school's holiday is coming], because there will be a national exam ...

Sample 2: (no subject and verb)

I want to explore the natural beauty of Garut, **if [it is] possible**, please accompany me to explore because I don't know Garut...

C. Pedagogical Recommendation

Generally, to correct problems faced by students in writing a text, teachers should consider some strategies and techniques to develop students' writing skills. In this study, based on the errors found in the sample of students' writing of personal letter text, teacher modeling strategy might be one of the right choices for the teacher to be applied by the teacher in teaching writing.

Modeling is a teaching strategy that emphasizes the importance of demonstrating a new concept or it can be referred to as the approach that focuses on students who observe and record what they learn from the teacher (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Moreover, teacher modeling is the situation that the teachers create for their students to experience something new and beneficial for them as both teachers and students (Fletcher, 1997; Loughran & Berry). Furthermore, Bandura & Walters (1963) have shown that the availability of models portraying a behavior and significantly influences behavior change.

Based on Bandura & Walters (1963), to be a great modeler, there are several steps that teachers should take. First, prepare the lesson well, particularly if the teachers are about to model a new concept. To check students' understanding, teachers could write and provide the questions to be asked to students. Second, give the students some related examples to foster students' prior knowledge. Next, teachers have to explain the links between ideas that teachers want to introduce and the ones that students have seen before. Fourth, teachers should emphasize the reasons why students have to learn and understand the material. Teachers can demonstrate the process and works together with the students through the examples. After demonstrating step has been completed, teachers can provide some prompts as appropriate to students' work. The most important step is providing an opportunity for students to work themselves. The last step is drawing some important aspects of the material that has been delivered.

To conclude, the modeling strategy emphasizes the teachers' demonstration to develop students' understanding of a new concept by observing and recording teachers' explanations. Particularly, this strategy is expected to be applied not only in producing an appropriate personal letter text but also in all writing tasks.

Furthermore, related to errors found on the SFL perspective in students' writing, the steps of modeling strategy might give some benefits for both students and teachers. For example, many examples of good personal letter text can expose students' knowledge of how to produce a well-organized personal letter. Moreover, a series of teacher demonstrations can help students to understand the appropriate stages in writing a personal letter. Students can also get some positive prompts or feedback from their teachers to reduce their mistakes in producing a personal letter.

Furthermore, the use of the modeling strategy is also appropriate with the context of the setting of this study is conducted. Since it was conducted in one of the public Senior High Schools located in a suburb area that has a limitation of teaching and learning media, the modeling strategy might be the best choice for teachers to exploit their teaching skills and creativity. Besides, this model can only be infused to every stage of learning without influencing the core activity that is written in the lesson plan.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study focuses on investigating students' writing and discovering the appropriate pedagogical recommendations to minimize the problems faced by the students in writing personal letters.

The analysis results confirm there are two major problems that students faced in producing a personal letter. First, one aspect of interpersonal metafunction was disappeared, namely subject and finite, resulting in incomplete clauses and sentences to deliver the idea completely. Second, students tended to use the same verb that refers to mental processes on experiential metafunction, causing the self-focused personal letters whereas personal letter is aimed to strengthen the relationship between writer and reader.

Furthermore, teachers play a pivotal role in teaching and learning activities. They have to provide good sources of texts for students, guide them to deconstruct the texts, and teach them how to compose their writing. Besides, the purposes of text based on the context and situation should also be explained. Therefore, a modeling strategy might become the best choice for teachers in their teaching of writing, especially personal letter text writing.

Moreover, the results of this study are expected to provide knowledge for teachers on kinds of errors are often made by students in writing personal letter text and to minimize these errors using the appropriate teaching strategies as proposed above. Since this study only focuses on personal letter text writing. Therefore, future research on other types of texts and also other pedagogical recommendations are necessary.

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