



University EFL Students' Grammar Mastery and Their Writing Ability: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract. Grammar is one of the language components that plays a vital role in performing good writing. However, problems occur when students produce a piece of writing. This study aimed to look into students' grammar mastery, discover the students' writing ability, and investigate the correlation between students' grammar mastery and students' writing ability. This study used a quantitative and correlational design to determine the correlation between two variables. The data were collected from 57 students from two classes from English Language Education Department students batch 2020 at a private university in Yogyakarta. The data were collected through documents of students' grades in Capita Selecta on Grammar and Academic Reading and Writing class. The first finding showed that the mean score was 79, indicating that the students' grammar mastery in this study was categorized into an advanced level. Moreover, the second finding showed that the mean score was 86 means the students' writing ability also was categorized as a very good level. The last finding showed that the significant value was 0.690 ($p = 0.690 > 0.05$), which means there is no significant correlation between students' grammar mastery and writing ability.

Keywords: correlation · EFL students · grammar mastery · university context · writing ability

1 Introduction

Grammar is essential and one of the main factors that influences writing ability. Grammar plays an important role in creating well-organized writing performances [1]. It is not only a language structure but also a foundation of every language. Without good grammar, students face difficulties conveying their minds [2, 3]. In Indonesia, it is mandatory for students to learn English grammar since they are in elementary school. However, this obligation does not ensure that the students can master the grammar.

On the other hand, many students struggle to master English grammar because they hardly remember the rules and patterns of tenses [1]. In addition, English is considered a foreign language, which is very different from the Indonesian language. Also, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesia face difficulties in learning English in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar [3].

The other language skill that is also important is writing skill. Writing is a crucial skill among the other language skills since it contains knowledge of structures, ideas,

other skills (e.g., critical thinking and creative thinking), and the ability to put all of them into written form. Writing is one of the productive skills in written form [4]. By that means, writing plays a vital role in a language. It also motivates EFL learners to be good at writing. EFL learners might find it challenging to write in English since English is not their daily language. Moreover, a good piece of writing is not only about organizing ideas in a structured way but also about using proper grammar.

Thus, grammar and writing both need to be mastered so that EFL learners can convey their ideas. As grammar is a foundation for writing activities, it is safe to say that grammar mastery also holds a pivotal role in improving writing ability [5].

The study by [6] aimed to find the correlation between grammar mastery and writing ability in fourth-semester midwifery students using the TOEFL and English writing tests. He found that midwifery students could analyze the use of tenses or proper grammar when writing an essay. He also found a significant correlation between grammar mastery and writing ability in midwifery students.

The importance of grammar mastery and writing ability are related to one another. However, grammar was students' biggest challenge in writing an essay [7]. It can be seen from their findings that the students did not use the proper tenses, pronouns, articles, and auxiliaries and had sentence fragments in their essays.

Another fact that shows the most prominent obstacle students face is grammar comes from Anh's study [8]. In his study, Anh stated that students still faced difficulties in writing. After about ten years of studying English as a foreign language, grammar was still a great problem for Anh's participants in fulfilling their writing needs. Last but not least, the findings of Handayani and Johan [1] showed that even though students had studied grammar, they still struggled with grammatical errors. Several previous studies mention that some problems in writing came from grammar. Students faced many difficulties in writing, such as grammar difficulties and vocabulary limitations [9].

Additionally, writing is a complicated activity because it requires students' extensive abilities, such as mastering grammar, selecting vocabulary, and punctuation [10]. Lack of vocabulary, grammar difficulties, and lack of ideas is the most problems that students have in producing writing [11]. Based on the previous studies that mentioned problems in writing, the researchers concluded that English department students in Indonesia equally face those problems since English is not their daily language. Many still find it difficult to use correct grammar in oral and written forms when communicating with people.

Regarding all the problems above, the researchers intended to conduct this study to find out the students' mastery of grammar, students' writing ability, and whether the two variables are correlated.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Grammar Mastery

When someone can communicate fluently and accurately in the structure, either orally or in writing, it may mean they have a good mastery of grammar [12]. Furthermore, mastering the language structure allows students to save time. If people do not master grammatical patterns, they will likely rely on grammar checkers, which will be time-consuming. Some cases are even worse because they need to spend their money to hire

professionals to check their grammar. English grammar is not only a rule but also contains knowledge on selecting the proper tenses. Therefore, people should learn and master grammar if they want to produce sentences accurately and use their time effectively.

Another definition of grammar mastery is someone's ability to produce words into meaningful sentences because they can change the form of words into sentences. Grammar mastery is about the English rules and how to change from a form of words to a sentence [13]. By mastering grammar, language learners can easily communicate and share their ideas with people naturally because they have the basic rule of the language in their mind. To produce meaningful sentences, oral and written communication is necessary to apply the basic rule. Mastering grammar helps learners to share their points of view accurately and effectively in the form of oral or written communication [8]. Moreover, mastering grammar is one of the ways to help students master all English skills.

Grammar has rules and theories of components that need to be learned. Grammar has three basic sets of structured rules in English: Etymology, Orthography, and Syntax [14]. Etymology is a group of words. It is famously known as Parts of Speech. Parts of speech consist of a noun, adjective, verb, adverb, pronoun, preposition, conjunction, and interjection. An orthography is a spelling form in which English has four main theories. They are spelling, capitalization, beheading, and punctuation. Meanwhile, the syntax is transforming words into performing a sentence correctly.

Mastering grammar is not only about quantity but also quality. To be mastered grammar is a must. According to the explanations above, we know that mastering grammar can be one of the ways to master all English skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Unfortunately, mastering grammar is complicated because many theories must be mastered. To measure one's level of grammar mastery, a student needs to take a skill test. The test is often called English Proficiency Test, such as TOEFL, TOIEC, IELTS, etc. There are several sections in EPT. One of them is called Language Structure, which usually consists of 40 questions.

Although there are many theories in grammar, only several are discussed. The first is word classes or often known as parts of speech. Parts of speech consist of nine-word classes: Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb, Pronoun, Preposition, Determination, Conjunction, and Number [13, 14]. Learning and mastering parts of speech are essential for students because it allows students to analyze the function and classify what kind of words are used.

The second feature is a complex sentence. Before talking about the complex, the researchers will start introducing the other kind of sentences. Simple, compound, and compound-complex sentences are three different types of sentences. A simple sentence only has one independent clause, which is only consisting of one subject and one verb [5, 6, 14]. A compound sentence has more than one independent clause. In addition to identifying the connection between clauses, one independent clause to the other is usually used with conjunctions. There are three types of conjunctions. According to Walden University, coordinating, paired, and subordinating conjunctions. Coordinating conjunction consists of FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Paired conjunction is used to make a choice and to give alternatives. It consists of four main paired conjunction, i.e., both...and, not only...but also, either...or, neither...nor. Last but not least is

subordinating conjunction. It signals between two relationships of a phrase, i.e., after, although, while, if, since, that, etc.

The next feature is tense. Grammatical tense often describes something that happens and the time when that happened. Grammatical tense is divided into present, past, and future tenses [14]. The present tense indicates something that happens both in the present time and the future. There are four kinds of present tenses. All of them are different depending on the time, and the event takes place. Past tense is used to talk about something that happened in the past. However, sometimes past tense is also used for politeness and hypothesis. There are four different past tense forms. The future tense is intended to inform about an event that refers to a later time. The future tense can also convey our attitude toward future events. The purposes of each tense are quite different. Therefore, the usage of the tenses must be paying attention to the time when an event occurs.

2.2 Importance of Grammar Mastery for EFL Students

Since grammar plays a vital role in a language, most EFL students want to master grammar in the shortest time possible. Grammar or structure in English is important. As a part of language, grammar cannot be ignored because it is part of a language “there is no language without structure” [1]. Without having a good structure, someone can be less confident in conveying their minds, and therefore, the listener and the reader cannot understand fully. People cannot understand what someone means if their grammar is neither correct nor accurate [10]. It helps people comprehend or get meaning in communication”. It shows that having good grammar will help people communicate accurately. Grammar is considered essential to language learning. Practicing and mastering grammar helps them to be able to learn English.

2.3 Writing Ability

When a student can perform or produce good writing, it may mean that a student has good writing skills. “Writing ability is the ability of students in producing a good writing to express their own ideas using appropriate vocabulary, grammar” [8].

Being able to produce good writing is not easy. Writing skills require both knowledge and skills, such as transforming an idea into writing, selecting the proper vocabulary and language structure, and ensuring readers understand the writing. In writing, learners can have the ability even free to share their points of view. No limit in writing makes people go beyond their creativity. Also, writing skills enhance their imagination. It is in line with Harshini's study [15], which stated that one of the three critical things for writing is imaginative skills. Imaginative skills allow learners to be able to write beyond their imagination. Writing is challenging for many EFL learners because they are supposed to write in different types, such as report writing, essay, research proposal, scientific writing, etc.

Although writing is one of the challenging skills, learners should master it. Performing writing, learners often make mistakes or errors in selecting tense (e.g., any other grammar components), vocabulary and punctuation, etc. However, writing skills can be improved and mastered if students practice and learn about them.

2.4 Importance of Writing Ability for EFL Students

From the definitions and the importance of writing above, it is fair to say that in writing, students need to have the ability to perform and transfer their thoughts, ideas, and feeling into the writing form. The ability in writing can be seen if the students have successfully transferred their ideas clearly and effectively. Writing skills also help EFL learners to expand their other learning English skills, such as analyzing, arguing, and critical thinking skills [16].

Furthermore, developing the ability to write can be crucial for EFL students because they have to be able to write for academic purposes. As English is a foreign language in Indonesia, English plays a very important role because if the learners wish to study abroad, they need to meet the requirement such as academic writing. In addition, they have to essays or motivation letters which require them to write formally. Yi argued that writing is not only a communication skill but also gives students the chance to study abroad (as cited in Toba, Noor & Sanu, 2019). A good writing ability can be a determining factor in getting a scholarship. It means that writing skills bring the students to their wish to study abroad.

Regarding good writing, there must be some criteria for why someone has good writing ability. Good writing includes features full of benefits and knowledge and is generated through careful thinking that goes along with four main points [7, 17]. The first is the target audience. The target means that the writers need to know the target readers' needs. They need to ensure that they understand and consider the interest of their target readers. The second is a coherent structure, which refers to the patterns or schemes, including an introduction, body, and conclusion. The third is a smooth, detailed development. To produce a good piece of writing, writers must organize their ideas and discuss them in detail so that the points of the writing can be delivered to the readers. The last point is an appropriate style. Writers need to understand that their writing is suitable for everyone. Therefore, selecting a style to produce meaningful writing is a must. The preference for using good combinations of word choices in communicating can also be a consideration for the writers.

"A good writing," according to Laist [18], usually has five keys. The first key is fluency. It refers to the writer's abilities to use what kinds of communication in writing, i.e., whether she wants to write freely, confidently, and playfully. Fluency can also be categorized as grammatical accuracy but not necessarily. In addition, "good" writing needs to have a context to tell the target readers what the writing is. Laist defined context as a piece of writing to convey the impression of any genre in writing. Next, enthusiasm. Writing connects the writer and the reader. Therefore, the tendency of emotional level tends strongly with the readers. "Good" also comes from the originality of work. Laist mentioned that the most important of "good" writing is originality. Laist believes there is no point in writing if the writing is not original.

2.5 Grammar Mastery and Writing Ability

Grammar is one of the English forms that correlates with four English skills, one of them is writing. Grammar is a foundation for writing activities [17]. Grammar can also be said to be the foundation of a language. Grammar is the knowledge of selecting a

proper group of words, while writing is a skill where ideas or opinions are written. Moreover, grammar and writing cannot be separated because the two are essential and related. Grammar has also been closely associated with students' writing skills because whenever they want to write something, they need to pay close attention to the choice of tenses, punctuation, or even part of speech to produce a good piece of writing. The ability in writing can be seen by students' ability to master grammar.

Grammar is one of the sources of problems in writing. "Grammar is always as a top of lack in making of good writing due to grammar incorrect" [19]. Mastering grammar in writing is a must. In addition to the problems, delivering information through writing needs correct grammar so that the writer and the reader will understand the message. Grammar and writing will not always be together. In order to perform good writing, grammar is not the only one that has an important role. Vocabulary, for example, also has a pivotal role in writing. Unfortunately, most EFL learners still struggle to write because of their limited knowledge of grammar. Based on the explanation above, the current research hypothesizes that there is a significant correlation between English department students' grammar mastery and writing ability.

3 Method

This study used a quantitative approach to measure the phenomenon using statistical data. This study employed a correlational design allowing the researchers to discover the association between the two variables. Correlational design in this study was used to analyze the correlation between students' grammar mastery and writing ability. In this study, there are two variables that the researchers intended to determine: grammar mastery and writing ability.

3.1 Participants

The population consisted of 159 students in the English department of a private university in Indonesia. A total of 57 students who had already completed grammar and writing courses were selected to participate in the study.

3.2 Data Collection Method

In collecting data, this study adopted the document to get the information needed. Two documents were taken in this study, i.e., the students' scores from the grammar and writing classes.

The first document of students' scores in the grammar class. The scores were used to analyze students' grammar mastery levels. The second document is the same students' scores from the writing class, which were used to determine their writing ability.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study aimed to discover the students' grammar mastery, writing ability, and the association between those two. Each research question had a different data analysis. To

Table 1. The categories of students' grammar mastery

No	Interval	Categories
1	76–100	Advanced
2	51–75	Upper Intermediate
3	26–50	Intermediate
4	0–25	Basic

Table 2. The result of students' grammar mastery

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammar	57	56	97	79.03	9.682
Valid N (listwise)	57				

analyze the first two research questions, the researchers used a descriptive statistical technique to describe the numerical data by employing SPSS.

The last research question was answered by utilizing inferential statistics.

4 Findings and Discussion

There were three findings in this study. The first finding is the English department students' grammar mastery. The second finding refers to their writing ability, and the last finding will be about the correlation between the students' grammar mastery and writing ability.

4.1 Students' Grammar Mastery

The first objective of this study is to discover English department students' grammar mastery. There are four categories of students' grammar scores (Table 1).

Table 2 shows that the number of participants in this study was 57, whose scores range from 56 to 97. The statistic showed that the mean score was 79.03, meaning their grammar mastery was in the advanced category.

When someone is in advanced grammar mastery, she possesses a high degree of knowledge or competence. However, advanced grammar mastery may have a different meaning: being proficient. A proficient language user means she has thoughts and the ability to use a language grammatically and identify when others are using it [14]. In short, advanced grammar is a learner's ability to generate a language grammatically.

The study of composition principles and strategies beyond the fundamental level is also known as advanced grammar. Beyond the essentials, success in grammar demands a firm foundation in correctly using words, phrases, sentence clauses, and paragraphs.

Table 3. The categories of students' writing ability

No	Interval	Categories
1	80–100	Very good
2	66–79	Good
3	56–65	Fair
4	50–55	Poor
5	< 39	Very Poor

Table 4. The result of students' writing ability

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Writing	57	75	94	86.71	3.157
Valid N (listwise)	57				

Table 5. Correlational result

		Grammar	Writing
Grammar	Pearson Correlation	1	.054
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.690
	N	57	57
Writing	Pearson Correlation	.054	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.690	
	N	57	57

4.2 Students' Writing Ability

This second research question aims to discover the students' writing ability in the English Department. The degree of interpretation used is based on Table 3.

From the calculation of SPSS, the writing score ranged from 75 to 94. The average score is 86.71, which means that the students' ability in writing is in the very good category (Table 4).

Being in this particular category means that the students can produce good writing. Criteria of good writing are accurate and concise; in addition, the meaning or actual communicative content is dealt with afterward [20].

4.3 The Correlation Between Grammar Mastery and Writing Ability

Table 5 shows that the p-value is 0.690. The significant value is > 0.05 , meaning there is no significant correlation between the two variables. From the result, it is concluded

that there is no significant correlation between students' grammar mastery and students' writing ability. To sum up, the alternative hypothesis in this study is rejected.

Previous research has shown a significant correlation between students' grammar mastery and writing ability [5]. The study showed that students with good grammar mastery also tend to have good writing ability. This study also showed the same. However, the finding on the correlation showed the opposite. The present study shows that the two variables have no significant correlation.

A few explanations are offered on why such results were gained. Firstly, the instruments used in this study differ from previous studies. Those studies used more than one instrument (i.e., documents and tests), while this study only used one instrument: documents. The researchers believed that the scores genuinely represented students' ability in both grammar and writing might not be entirely accurate. Students' scores may contain other factors, e.g., teachers' compassions. In other words, students' scores may not necessarily show students' genuine ability because teachers' subjectivity may have influenced students' scores. Hence, other instruments, like tests, may have yielded different results.

Another reason the results of the current study are different from the results of the previous studies may have been caused by the small sample size. The population of this study is 159 students, and only 57 students were selected to participate. Selecting the number of participants depends on the needs of the study [10]. However, if the study aims to show trends in a population of learners, then an appropriate number of participants is a matter to ensure such generalization.

5 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the students' grammar mastery, find out the student's writing ability, and examine the correlation between students' grammar mastery and students writing ability. This study involved 57 English department students at a private university in Yogyakarta in the academic year 2020/2021. This study used a quantitative method and implemented a correlation research design. In addition to the method, this study used documents as instruments. The mean score of students' grammar mastery is in the advanced category. It means that the students have mastered theories taught in grammar class which are part of speech, adjectives, conjunctions, adjective clauses, and complex sentences.

Additionally, the mean score of students' writing ability is 86 means that their writing ability is in the very good category. To conclude, English department students were considered to be able to perform good writing since they have learned types of text such as sentences, paragraphs, descriptive, and narrative texts. Also, the p- value is 0.690 which is > 0.05 . It means there is no significant correlation between students' grammar mastery and writing ability.

This study will have a positive impact on the teaching and learning process. The impact is that teachers know that mastering grammar can be helped by practicing writing. Mastering a language structure or grammar could help students not to rely on an application to check their grammatical errors. The mastery also helps them to improve other language skills, such as listening, speaking, and reading. Besides, other researchers

who read this study will also be expected to have more information about the correlation between students' writing skills and grammar mastery.

This research suggests that students as language learners keep learning and improving their target language. Students should also be aware that grammar and writing correlate based on previous studies and are important to study. In order to improve their quality of writing skills, the current research seems to suggest that students learn grammar. Good grammar mastery and writing ability are essential skills in English and perhaps all languages. It should motivate educators, especially lecturers, to teach and grade students objectively. Also, it is recommended that the lecturers focus more on teaching students about grammar since it is one of the crucial components of English.

This study might provide a different point of view on the correlation between students' grammar mastery and students writing ability, but future researchers are suggested to explore and investigate more by having more than one instrument. Other researchers can implement research with more depth and specific topics on grammar mastery and writing ability.

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