

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Problem

Academic writing has long been considered as one of the most important aspects in students' higher education. It plays a vital role in determining students' competence primarily in mastering specific skills in particular fields of study and contributes significantly to students' success at university. There are various types of academic writing with which students have to deal during completing their study. Some of the common forms are essay, note, report, paper and project (Hinkel, 2004: 4; Bailey, 2011: 3; Gillet, Hammond & Martala, 2009: 7-11). They are typically assigned to student as part of assignments or final examinations. Meanwhile, the highly complex and demanding ones include thesis and dissertation whose primarily goal is to facilitate students to report their research as a partial requirement to pursue a degree in particular study programs (Richards & Miller, 2005: 37; Bailey, 2011: 4).

From all of these academic writing types, essay and report are the most common forms assigned to students at colleges or universities. Essay has been considered as the most basic genre. One of its common form is opinion essay consisting of three to five paragraph essays (Zemach & Rumisek, 2005: 56). It is used to discuss and explore something deeply by providing ideas in different viewpoints. It is commonly written in task or examination as response to question which requires students to state position and reasons (i.e. *Discuss the following*

question, Explain how... and In what extend do you agree or disagree with ...). Meanwhile, report is written to report investigation result of some situations, events or phenomenon. It has longer part than essay including beginning, middle and end (Gillet, Hammond & Martala, 2009: 8).

The primary aims of academic writing is to facilitate students to show their academic voice. Through this writing, students can show their understanding and knowledge of theories learned, demonstrate awareness of what has been learned, and provide view points and reasons (Gillet, Hammond & Martala, 2009: 3). It is done either in answering question in examination, reporting research, or discussing subjects of common interest (Bailey, 2011: 3) Due to its vital role in academic life, it is essential for students to have good ability in this subject area. In addition, they should be exceedingly aware of all associated aspects that give significant impacts to quality of their writing products.

There are many aspects that should be students' attention in order to succeed in academic writing mainly in constructing good text. One of the most significant is idea organization which is directly related to text presentation (Ping, 2007). Erdosy (2004) and MacIntyre (2007) in Ruegg & Sugiyama (2013: 2) explain that idea organization is an indispensable part of writing. It has two important concepts, coherence and cohesion, which always become key parameters in determining writing quality. The fact that idea organization is compulsory can be seen from its role in the analytic rating scales in standardized tests such as IELTS, SAT and TOEFL (Lumley, 2002; Hinkel, 2004).

In addition, a study conducted by Rosenfeld, Leung and Oltman (2001) rightly supports this claim. They conducted survey of 155 undergraduate and 215 undergraduate faculty in 21 U.S. universities to identify the essential skills of non-native speaker students' writing skills in courses ranged from psychology, history, business, engineering and chemistry. They found that the responses of undergraduate faculty clearly indicate that organizing writing to convey major and supporting ideas and using relevant examples to support them occupy top priority in the quality of academic writing. Meanwhile, the graduate faculty identified largely similar priorities in student writing with regard to the importance of information/discourse organization and examples.

Furthermore, there is one important linguistic element that significantly contributes to the idea organization in a text which directly contributes significantly to students' success in academic writing. This element is what Halliday & Matthiessen (2004: 29) called as Thematic Structure, an important concept of message structure in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) which operates at clause level (Bloor & Bloor, 2004: 71). This structure belongs to textual metafunction which is one of three language metafunctions in SFL that was primarily developed by Michael Haliday. The two others are ideational and interpersonal metafunctions.

Bloor & Bloor (2004: 10-11) explain that textual metafunction is used to relate what is said (or written) to the rest of the text and to other linguistics events. It involves the use of language to organize the text itself. Ideational metafunction is the function of language to organize, understand and express human perceptions of

the world and of their own consciousness. Meanwhile, interpersonal metafunction is the function of language to enable people to participate in communicative acts with other people, to take on roles and to express and understand feelings, attitude and judgements. These three language metafunctions do not work separately. They function simultaneously as humans produce and use the language in their communicative social interaction.

As people communicate, whether in written or spoken mode, they try to organize what they say or write well to ease their reader or listener to understand the message. The way of organizing this message or information is called thematic structure. Its constituents are Theme and Rheme. Theme is the starting point of the message in the clause or point of departure of the message, while Rheme is the rest of the clause which is developed from Theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 64-65). Theme in this study is a linguistic category which is different with common Theme or topic (Bloor & Bloor, 2004: 64). As different languages have different Theme and Rheme structure, this study only focus on English.

As explained by Halliday & Matthiessen (2004: 64-65), Theme in English is a position-bound, clause-initial element. Whatever is selected as Theme is always positioned initially in a clause. As the development of Theme, Rheme comes after Theme. Both Theme and Rheme which form thematic structure have crucial role in the readability and appearance of a text and in general plays a central role in our everyday communication. It sets up an environment in which the message can be interpreted and understood clearly (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). Careful attention to the starting points and appropriate developments plays significant role

in organizing message in the text and determines the whole organization of the text (Saragih, 2007: 12).

Moreover, Theme helps the speaker or writer specify the place in the listener or reader network of meaning where the meaning is to be incorporated as relevant (Halliday, 1994: 38). Fries (1995) in Hawes (2015: 94) believes that kinds of meaning in the thematic position vary depending on the purpose of the writer/speaker, who can manipulate the reactions of reader/listener by changing the content of Themes. Hawes (2015: 94) states that Theme and Rheme forms links with the Themes and Rhemes of subsequent clauses to allow the text to move forward in what is known as *thematic progression*. It creates a schematic relationship and connects the Themes and Rhemes inter-clauses.

Hawes (2015: 94-95) further explains that an understanding of how information is structured in clauses and the different methods of combining the elements of Theme and Rheme into stretches of discourse is essential for cohesion and coherence of writing particularly in English. Theme and Rheme act as the building bricks of cohesion intra-clauses. But their role in thematic progression, which fans out across whole texts and indicates where topic begin and end, also points up a text's underlying organization, thereby giving them a vital place in coherence texture of a text.

Native English speakers may subconsciously acquire such the understanding of organizing ideas following thematic structure and thematic progression. However, most of non-native students are lack of exposures of this kind of information patterning. The reason is there are too many different elements

of English that should be learnt and acquired by students. It is in line with Hinkel (2004: 4) who explains that most of non-native speaker students encountered great deal of difficulty in their studies at college and university. She further explains that most of students produced academic papers and essays that were observed to be unfocused, confusing and rhetorically unstructured besides other problems of language accuracy. She also states that some significant differences between L1 and L2 writing including discourse and rhetorical organization and modes become major influencing factors of students' writing (Hinkel, 2004: 10).

Moreover, in case of Indonesian students, problem of organizing and developing ideas in academic writing is also still a major issue encountered particularly by Indonesian higher university students. It can be seen from previous studies that show Indonesian students' difficulties in maintaining ideas organization in their text as reflected through problems in connecting and arranging ideas in text. A study conducted by Hasan and Marzuki (2017) showed problems on coherence and cohesion of non-English undergraduate students in English letter writing tasks. Coherence and cohesion are also among the major problems of English department students in writing essays besides grammatical problems (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Ardriyati & Hartono, 2004). In writing argumentative texts, Abbas (2017) and Rahmatunnisa (2014) found that English students encountered difficulties in organizing and developing ideas into paragraph.

Problems in applying the coherence and unity aspects in paragraph writing are also encountered by English Department students in a University in Banda Aceh (Fajri, 2016). Moreover, most of undergraduate students failed to achieve

coherence in their abstract writing due to their inability to apply cohesive devices including references, conjunctions, and ellipsis (Suwandi, 2016). Some problems in applying coherence and cohesion aspects including logical order (Liyana, 2014) and adequate paragraph composition (Husin & Nurbayani, 2017) are also still found in undergraduate students' thesis writing.

There have been numerous studies analysing the way ideas are organized in students' academic writing through Theme and thematic progression analysis. They found that Theme and thematic progression are useful tool to characterise ESL/EFL students' writing difficulties and writing as successful or less successful particularly in term of coherence and cohesion (Schleppegrell, 2004; Wang, 2007; Mellos, 2011; Hawes, 2014; Jing, 2014). Related studies have also been conducted in different texts and genres including essay/composition (Ping, 2007; Jalilifar, 2010b; Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012; Soleymanzadeh & Gholami, 2014), thesis abstract (Rahmawati & Kurniawan, 2015), argumentative text (Bakaa, 2015), exposition texts (Rakhman, 2012), recount text (Yunita, 2018), research articles and journals (Jalilifar, 2010a; Gunawan & Aziza, 2017; Ping, Cin & Toh, 2018; Lore, 2004; Rafiei & Modhirkamene, 2012).

All of these studies successfully explored how effective students are in organizing and structuring their ideas through the use of Theme and thematic progression and what difficulties they encountered. Studies on Theme and thematic progression comparing students' texts based on particular variables have also been conducted by some researchers. As Summarised by Jing (2014: 74-76), numerous studies have indicated that there are some influencing factors that characterized

students in their use of Theme and thematic progression. Those factors include first language transfer, proficiency level, disciplinary background, communication strategies, and target language input.

Most of these studies exclusively provide briefly descriptive analysis on the use of Theme and thematic progression in students' texts. The texts being analysed were mostly written through regular writing processes including planning, outlining, drafting, and revising in which students have much time to reorganize and restructure their texts. However, there are a very limited number of studies which investigate the thematic structure and progression in students' texts written in test situation such as English standardised test.

The analysis on Theme and thematic progression on such standardized test text may reveal new finding as the way students organize their ideas in their texts are absolutely different due to test situation. As supported by Curry (2004) in Khuder and Harwood (2015: 235), test situation influences writers' writing product in which their focus tend to be on word level (grammar and vocabulary choice) rather than the substance of their writing (generating ideas and considering the coherence of their arguments). Therefore, considering some related factors discussed previously, the researcher was interested in investigating Themes and thematic progression in students' texts written standardized writing test.

The texts analyzed in this study are students' essays of IELTS academic writing test especially Task 2 which belong to expository essay. The main reason is that IELTS is one and only globally standardized English proficiency test which assesses students' four language skills ability. It significantly reflects students'

language proficiency level as it is accepted by most universities all over the world. Besides, idea organization represented through coherence and cohesion is among the four aspects assessed in in this test. It emphasized that this aspect contributes significantly to students' writing score as it is included into the four aspects which determine students' proficiency.

In addition, Task 2 was chosen because it contributes much to students' score than Task 1. Another reason is that in Task 2, students are required to provide arguments in response to the selected topic given. In this case, the starting point of the messages in first clause of students' essays truly influences the development of the whole texts. Wrong choice of point of departure of the message may give significant effect to students' essay quality. This is because students only have very limited time and there is no chance to revise what they have stated in their texts.

The IELTS academic writing essays analysed in this study were written by students taking IELTS test at Language Development Centre of Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. This test was conducted at the Language Development Centre at the end of December of 2018. Besides analysing Theme and thematic progression realised in all students' essays, this study also attempted to compare the differences of Theme types and thematic progression patterns realised in both the low and high scoring essays. This is due to the fact proficiency level is one factor that may influence students in in employing Theme and thematic progression in their essays.

B. Identification of the Problem

Theme and thematic progression are two important aspects of written discourse organization. These elements significantly contribute to the idea organization and text coherence and cohesion or texture. Recent studies have revealed that students still encounter problems in organizing and developing their ideas in academic writing. It is indicated by their difficulties in building text coherence and cohesion. Furthermore, there have been a growing number of research on Theme and thematic progression. Most of them aimed to describe the thematic choice and progression of students' writing descriptively without giving much more analysis on how students differ in choosing Theme and using thematic progression patterns. The text type being analysed are mostly written in non-test condition. However, very few of them analyse texts which are test products such as standardised test where the writers given limited time so that they have insufficient preparation and chance to evaluate their writing. Therefore, this research attempts to find out students' thematic choice and progression through Theme and thematic progression analysis and how students are different in the use of those Theme and thematic progression pattern based on their proficiency level.

C. Limitation and Formulation of the Problem

Based on the identification of the problems above, the researcher is interested in conducting a research in analysing the way student organize and develop their ideas in standardized writing test. The texts analysed are the English

expository essays of IELTS Academic Writing test. The problem will be limited on thematic choices and progression. The formulation of the problems are as follow:

1. What are the common Themes used by students of IELTS Preparation Program of Language Development Centre of Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta in their expository essays?
2. What are the thematic progression patterns used by these students in their expository essays?
3. What are the differences of the use of Themes and thematic progression patterns in the low and high scoring essays?

D. Objective of the Research

The objectives of this research are:

1. to identify the Themes used by students of IELTS Preparation Program of Language Development Centre of Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta in their expository essays.
2. to investigate the thematic progression patterns used by these students in their expository essays.
3. to map the differences of the use of Themes and thematic progression patterns in the low and high scoring expository essays.

E. Significance of the Research

This research hopefully gives significances in the following aspects:

1. Theoretically

This research is expected to give significant contributions on the development of the theory of idea organization particularly in written discourse based on Systemic Functional Linguistics approach. Focusing on academic writing, this research hopefully contributes to the development of theory of coherence and cohesion in written discourse. The findings may also contribute to the theory of factors influencing students in organizing their ideas in writing.

2. Practically

This research is a kind of applied linguistics research. By conducting this research, the researcher expects that it gives significant contributions and benefits to the students and language teachers/lecturers in some aspects.

a. Students

The result of the research may improve students' understanding in organizing and developing ideas in academic writing following thematic structure and progression. Knowledge about Themes and their progression can contribute to students' ability to produce coherent and cohesive text as it helps students control the flow of information and maintain discourse. It may lead to the improvement of students' writing ability and quality particularly in building text coherence and cohesion. Specifically, this research may also help students participating in IELTS test and other test such as LPDP scholarship selection to construct effective expository essay by following appropriate Theme selection and method of development or thematic progression.

b. Language Teacher/Instructor

The result of this research may improve teacher and instructor's comprehension of thematic structure and how it contributes significantly to text construction and text coherence and cohesion. It could significantly enrich language classroom instruction focusing on the exploration of Theme and thematic progression in order to improve students' ability in writing academic text. For teachers/instructors teaching writing for IELTS test, it could be a good resource to deepen their comprehension on thematic structure to help students writing effective expository or argumentative essays and to achieve better scores.