WRITELOGUE PLATFORM TO IMPROVE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS’ MASTERY OF ENGLISH NOUN PHRASES

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ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, before their graduation, university students are expected to write papers in English to be published in academic journals. They therefore need to be proficient in the art of written communication. One of the common grammatical aspects used in papers is English Noun Phrases (shortened as NPs). This research describes Indonesian university students’ mastery of English NPs, and developing WriteLogue platform for English NP modules to improve their mastery. The research results show that having completed all the modules in WriteLogue, the students’ mastery of English NPs improved significantly; nevertheless, they still had difficulties in forming NPs, correcting erroneous NPs, using correct word order with a series of adjectives, and selecting appropriate words in translating Indonesian NPs into English ones. Lack of basic English grammar knowledge, limited vocabulary repertoire, and insufficient time to practice using the learned patterns were the possible causes of their difficulties.

Keywords: premodifiers, postmodifiers, noun phrase, WriteLogue

INTRODUCTION

Good writing skills are of great importance in today’s globalizing world, as much of the world's communication is done via writing. In Indonesia, before their graduation, university students are expected to write papers in English to be published in academic or
scientific journals. This policy is to support Indonesian scholarly research results to be internationally known. Indonesian university students, therefore, need to be proficient in the art of written communication.

Writing ideas in well-formed English sentences requires good English grammar. One of the important aspects in English grammar is Noun Phrases (shortened as NPs), which occupy in various parts of a sentence as a subject, a subject complement, an object, an object complement, or even an appositive. According to DeCapua (2017) NPs are one of the major classes in English grammar to carry the content and meaning of a sentence. Using NPs in writing enables a writer to use fewer words in expressing complex ideas. With these roles, NPs certainly occupy a dominant role in a piece of academic writing.

Many studies in the aspect of English NPs have been conducted in various countries where English is used in education. Tedjasuksmana and Yappy (2006) did research on how non-English department students used NP constructions in the structure part of the TOEFL. The result indicated that these students were not aware that a noun could be followed by a prepositional phrase, that the subject of a sentence was a noun, and an NP might consist of parallel constructions. Thus, they had difficulties in determining the form of the verbs as they were not able to detect the head noun as either singular or plural and identify the correct NP constructions, especially the complex ones.

A study on the complexity between native and non-native speakers’ writing products have been investigated by Valkova and Korinkova (2014). They identified some particular characteristics of NPs made by Czech advanced students. They concluded that there was a tendency for the Czech participants to aim towards simple constructs of English NPs in comparison to their native English participants, who used more complex and longer NPs in the writing products.
Next, Biber, Gray, Staples, and Egbert (2016) in their study found that NP constructions used by the students were, among others, those with attributive adjectives, noun modifiers, prepositional phrases, that-clauses as appositives, adjective clauses, dependent clauses with that and to, non-finite clauses in passive constructions. They found that the higher the academic level of the students, the more complex clauses these students used in their writing.

Ariwibowo and Tedjasuksmana (2018) investigated how the Indonesian students of the English Department formed postmodifiers in NPs. The result showed that prepositional phrases and restrictive adjective clauses were mostly used by the students. This indicated that these students still could not use the various patterns of post-modification.

Ruan (2018) made a study about grammatical features of compressed discourse style in native and non-native students’ academic writing in applied linguistics and found that explicit awareness of compact grammatical features was crucial to L2 academic writers in achieving the rhetorical and pragmatic goals in academic writing. The finding suggested that the use of complex noun phrases be given significant attention. A similar study was conducted by Ahmadi and Esfandiari (2018) in studying research article abstracts. From two different sets of corpora (International Corpus – IC and Persian Corpus – PC), they found that the articles in the PC employed fewer postmodifiers for NPs than the international academic writers indexed in the IC due to the issue of syntactic repertoire to phrasal features of academic writing.

Susanto (2019) in his study on the ability of the English Department students in analyzing noun phrases in reading texts found that the students’ ability was still poor as they could not identify the patterns of premodifier—head noun and head noun—postmodifier. Thus, these students apparently had difficulty recognizing the constructions of NPs.
These studies indicate that though English NPs have a high frequency use in English writing, many students still have problems using these NP patterns. The English NPs should, therefore, be given more attention in academic writing at the university level. These studies have encouraged the current research to accommodate the need to help students master the English NPs. With this purpose, this present research, therefore, aims at improving the Indonesian university students’ mastery of the English Noun Phrases (NPs) by developing a Moodle-based platform for the English NP modules called Writelogue. There are eight English NP modules developed and uploaded in Writelogue. The developed modules are expected to improve university students’ mastery of the English NPs, which simultaneously will help them to write academic papers better.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section begins with the description of English Noun Phrases, which elaborates on the common patterns of English Noun Phrases. Then it is followed by the discussion of Writelogue, a Moodle-based platform designed and developed for this research.

English Noun Phrases (NPs)

Grammar is the set of structural rules that influences the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given language. Having sufficient grammar knowledge is needed to form grammatically acceptable sentences as this knowledge helps to understand how words and their component parts combine to form sentences (Saidvaliyevna, 2018). Similarly, DeCarrio and Larsen-Freeman (2002), and DeCapua, (2017) state that a sentence is a realization of ideas expressed which follow grammatical rules of the language, and these rules are shared in the minds of the native speakers of the language. Further, Bieber et al. (2016, p.1) remark that “a comprehensive linguistic description of grammatical structures and
uses is required to fully understand the characteristics of student texts and the nature of student writing development”.

In English, NPs act as a dominant part in a sentence. Like any grammatical materials, NPs are to be based on linguistically-interpretable analyses. English NPs need to be formed in accordance with their patterns.

English NPs, although it is a dominant element in a sentence, seem not to be easily constructed by Indonesian students, as it requires them to have sufficient grammatical knowledge. Forming solid NPs conveys structurally effective constructions instead of expressing ideas in elaborate sentences. A noun phrase is a phrase having a noun as the head; it has a grammatical function as a noun, which can occupy different positions in a sentence: a subject, a subject complement, an object, an object complement, or an appositive. English NPs, generally, can be formed with pre-modification, post-modification or both pre- and post-modification.

Basically, there are three groups of English NPs: (1) NPs with Premodifiers, (2) NPs with Postmodifiers, and (3) NPs with both Premodifiers and Postmodifiers. The premodifiers that modify the head nouns are determiners, nouns, adjectives, and hyphenated modifiers; whereas the post modifiers that modify the head nouns are participial phrases, adjective clauses, and prepositional phrases.

**Writelogue**

*Writelogue*, a Moodle-based platform, is the place where the developed modules of English NPs are posted. It is developed to accommodate a blended learning system to enable Indonesian students to learn these modules at their own pace. With this blended learning, students meet their tutors for some offline tutorials when they need more assistance with the modules.
In *Writelogue*, the modules of English NPs are classified into three big groups: (A) premodifier + head noun (shortened as HN), (B) HN + postmodifier, and (C) premodifier + HN + post modifier. The premodifier can be a noun, a determiner, an adjective or a hyphenated-modifier; while the postmodifier can be a prepositional phrase, an adjective clause, or a participial phrase. Altogether, there are eight English NP modules developed in this research as follows:

A. NPs with Premodifiers
   Module 1: Noun + HN
   Module 2: Determiner + HN
   Module 3: Adjective + HN
   Module 4: Hyphenated modifier + HN

B. NPs with Postmodifiers
   Module 5: HN + Prepositional Phrase
   Module 6: HN + Adjective Clause
   Module 7: HN + Participial Phrase

C. NPs with Premodifiers and Postmodifiers
   Module 8: Mixed Patterns

Each module (Modules 1-7) in *Writelogue* begins with a pre-test, followed by a theoretical explanation in the form of a tutorial video to help students understand the pattern. The tutor in the video uses English and Indonesian in explaining the English NP pattern to help the students understand it better. Next, following the video tutorial are five kinds of exercises of the discussed NP pattern, namely Multiple-Choice Exercise, Forming English Noun Phrases, Word Arrangement Exercise, Error Analysis Exercise, and Making Sentences. The feedback to the answers is provided in the module in *Writelogue*, and students will get feedback for their answers once they have completed the exercises. A tutorial session (onsite session in the classroom) is conducted to facilitate those who need more assistance in understanding the pattern. Finally, the module ends with a post-test, which is to be completed by the students after they have done all the exercises. Module 8 is a special module called Mixed Patterns; it contains mixed exercises of all the NP patterns. The students do five kinds of exercises of the seven NP patterns in *Writelogue*.
These modules along with the exercises are meant to develop Indonesian students’ mastery of English NPs so that they can use the patterns of English NPs properly in writing their academic papers. Rao (2019) states that the main aim of the teachers in teaching grammar is to teach the structure of the language systematically and make their students get good command over the language to produce the learned grammatical structures accurately when they use them in their real-life situations in either spoken or written form. To enable students to use the English NP patterns properly in their academic papers, they should do plenty of related exercises as Beare (2020) confirms that having lots of practice in English grammar will make a better understanding and better application; however, improper practice makes for improper performance.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design**

Best and Kahn (2006) explain that descriptive research (quantitative) uses quantitative methods to describe, record, analyze, and interpret conditions that exist. It involves some type of comparison or contrast and attempts to discover relationships between existing non-manipulated variables. To this point, Best and Kahn (2006) add that some form of statistical analysis is used to describe the results of the study.

This research is a descriptive study describing Indonesian university students’ mastery of English NPs. It portrayed the subjects’ mastery of English NPs before and after they completed all the modules in *Writelogue* and participated in the tutorials in this research.

**Participants**

Initially, there were 71 students who participated in the research: however, only 38 students completed all the pre-tests and the post-tests in the eight modules. These 38 students were taken as the research subjects. They were 8 male and 30 female Indonesians between 20
and 21 years old, sitting in the fourth or sixth semester in two private universities in Surabaya, Indonesia. They came from various towns and cities across Indonesia.

**Research Instruments**

The instruments used in this study were the *Writelogue* platform with the eight developed modules of the English NP patterns. Each of the modules is equipped with the pre-test and the post-test, which also serve as the research instruments to show the subjects’ progress in each NP pattern.

**Research Results**

In this present research, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the research subjects did the online modules in *Writelogue* and attended the online tutorial sessions provided. The research subjects began with the online pre-test. The pre-test consisted of two parts. Part 1 was related to the subjects’ knowledge of forming and using the English NPs (60 numbers), and part 2 dealt with their ability in writing their own English NPs. They were asked to translate Indonesian NPs into English NPs (30 numbers). The results of the pre-test revealed the data about their mastery of English NPs prior to completing each module.

Having completed all the modules in *Writelogue*, the subjects then did the post-test, which contained the same items as the pre-test. The results of the post-test showed the subjects’ progress. The subjects’ pre-test scores and post-test scores were the research data. To show the improvement or progress of their mastery, the pre-test scores and the post-test scores were statistically compared using the Shapiro Wilk testing in SPSS to measure the 2-tailed asymptotic significance for the normality tests of the modules. Table 1 summarizes the mean scores of the subjects’ pre-test and post-test scores and the results for the normality tests of all the modules.
Table 1
Mean scores of subjects’ pre-test & post-test scores and results of normality tests for each module

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Mean scores</th>
<th>Statistical calculation</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>Gain scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Module 1: Noun + HN</td>
<td>47.29</td>
<td>63.29</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Module 2: Determiner + HN</td>
<td>36.48</td>
<td>66.54</td>
<td>30.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Module 3: Adjective + HN</td>
<td>49.83</td>
<td>69.27</td>
<td>19.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Module 4: Hyphenated Mod. + HN</td>
<td>38.07</td>
<td>55.30</td>
<td>17.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Module 5: HN + Preposition Phrase</td>
<td>54.62</td>
<td>68.12</td>
<td>13.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Module 6: HN + Adjective Clause</td>
<td>34.17</td>
<td>60.54</td>
<td>26.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Module 7: HN + Participlal Phrase</td>
<td>45.85</td>
<td>66.69</td>
<td>20.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Module 8: Mixed Modules</td>
<td>27.66</td>
<td>50.29</td>
<td>22.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The statistical calculation between the pretest and the posttest scores of each module shows the subjects’ gain scores after completing all the modules and participating in the tutorial. The results show that there is indeed an increase from the pre-test scores to the post-test scores. It means that the NP modules (containing the tutorial videos along with exercises) helped the subjects understand the English NPs better.

Further analysis of the statistical calculations yields the following findings:

a) The subjects obtained the biggest gain scores in Module 2: Determiner + HN

b) The subjects obtained the smallest gain scores in Module 5: HN + Preposition Phrase
c) The subjects’ mastery of the English NPs improved significantly, as shown by these statistical calculations.

These findings imply that the modules of English NPs in Writelogue have significantly helped the subjects understand English NPs better. Despite the increase, the mean score of the post-test scores was still considered low. Though the cause was not thoroughly investigated, the field observation hinted that the subjects did not have sufficient time to internalize all the NP patterns, do the exercises, and review the modules in their own free time as they were forced to complete all the eight modules of English NPs in a relatively short time, that is less than 1 month. They, therefore, did not have any time to practice using these patterns in their own writing.

To obtain a better portrait of the subjects’ mastery of the English NPs, further analysis of the subjects’ post-test results in Module 8 was conducted. The analysis was focused on the post-test items which were incorrectly answered by more than 50% of the subjects. The analysis of Part 1 of the subjects’ post-test results yields the following findings:

a) 86.67% of the subjects’ mistakes were related to the NP Formation. There were 13 out of the 15 items in NP formation which were incorrectly answered.

b) 40% of the subjects’ mistakes were related to the Error Correction. There were 6 out of the 15 items in Error Correction which were incorrectly answered.

c) 26.67% of the subjects’ mistakes were related to the Word Order. There were 4 out of the 15 items in Word Order which were incorrectly answered.

d) 6.67% of the subjects’ mistakes were related to the Multiple Choice. There was 1 out of the 15 items in Multiple Choice which was incorrectly answered.

Table 2 summarizes the findings of the data analysis of Part 1 of the post-test.
Table 2

Types of subjects’ mistakes in part 1 of post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Test type</th>
<th>Total number of answers</th>
<th>Test items incorrectly answered by &gt; 50% of the subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number of test items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Forming NP (No. 31-45)</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Error Correction (No. 46-60)</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Word Order (No. 16-30)</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Multiple Choice (No. 1-15)</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second part of the Post-test, which asked the subjects to translate the Indonesian NPs into the English ones, reveals their ability in forming English NPs on their own. The subjects read a text in Bahasa Indonesia, and they were asked to form the English NPs from the ideas expressed in the Indonesian NPs. There were thirty numbers in this second part. Like the analysis of Part 1, the focus of the following analysis is on the test items in Part 2 which were incorrectly answered by more than 50% of the subjects.

The analysis of Part 2 of the subjects’ post-test results yields the following findings:

a) There were 21 out of 30 (70.00%) test items that were incorrectly answered by more than 50% of the subjects. Eleven out of these 21 problematic items were related to the English NPs with Premodifiers, two items were related to the English NPs with post modifiers, and eight items were related to the English NPs with mixed types of modifiers.

b) The English NP patterns that were still problematic for the subjects include

Determiner + HN (71.05%); Noun + HN (73.68%); Determiner + Noun + HN (71.05%); Determiner + Adjective + HN (71.05%); HN + Prepositional Phrase (69.74%); Determiner + HN + Prepositional Phrase (68.42%); Determiner +
Adjective + HN + Prepositional Phrase (75%); Determiner + Noun + HN + Participial Phrase (73.69%); and Determiner + HN + Prepositional Phrase + Prepositional Phrase (76.32%).

The following table summarizes the findings of the data analysis of part 2 of the post-test.

Table 3

Types of subjects’ mistakes in part 2 of post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>NP Pattern</th>
<th>Test items incorrectly answered by &gt; 50% of the subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Test item number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>NPs with Premodifiers</td>
<td>Det. + HN</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Noun + HN</td>
<td>77, 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Det + Noun + HN</td>
<td>66,86,88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Det + Adj. + HN</td>
<td>61,65,67,83,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>NPs with Postmodifiers</td>
<td>HN + Prep Phrase</td>
<td>71, 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>NPs with Premodifier &amp; Postmodifiers</td>
<td>Det + HN + Prep Phrase</td>
<td>75,78,81,85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Det + Adj. + HN + Prep Phrase</td>
<td>82, 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Det + Noun + HN + Participial Phrase</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Det + HN + Prep Phrase + Prep Phrase</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings in the two parts of the post-test indicate that the subjects still had difficulties in English NPs. Forming English NPs seems to be the most difficult for the subjects as shown by the percentage (86.67%) of the mistakes made by the subjects in Part 1 of the post-test in Table 2. This is then reconfirmed with the findings in Part 2 of the post-test that reveals 21 out of 30 items (70.00%) were incorrectly answered by the subjects. Table 3 clearly shows that the more complex the patterns were (as in Premodifier + HN + Postmodifier), the more difficult it was for the subjects to form the English NPs correctly.
With Error Correction, where the subjects had to be able to identify the deviations and correct them, the mistakes made show that the subjects were not able to identify the deviations and decide what possible NP patterns were to be used. As a result, 40% of the answers were incorrect. Concerning Word Order in part 1 of the post-test, in which the subjects were supposed to construct well-formed sentences with a sequence of determiners and adjectives which had to be correctly positioned, they had problems in identifying the categories of the adjectives (opinion, size, age, colour, origin etc.). As a result, they could not put the sequence of determiners and adjectives in the correct order; this is shown by the 26.67% of the subjects’ incorrect answers (see Table 2).

Further examination of the subjects’ incorrect answers leads to the following conclusions:

a) The problems with the English NPs faced by the subjects cannot be separated from their insufficient knowledge of basic English grammar, as stated by Saidvaliyevna (2018) that having sufficient grammar knowledge helps to understand how words and their component parts combine to form sentences. In order to be able to communicate ideas in a language properly, they should have some grammatical knowledge and some degree of proficiency. Concerning the basic English grammar, the subjects lacked the knowledge of the definite and indefinite articles, parts of speech, sentence parts, active and passive voice. In one example, in the Premodifier + HN pattern, many of the subjects had a problem with the use of a definite article ‘the’ as in # 86 the company activities and # 88 the company staff. Most of the subjects’ incorrect answers (*company staff, and *company activities) indicate the absence of a definite article ‘the’ to identify the company referred to in the text.

In another example (# 63), the subjects could not use the correct part of speech to form the nominal optimization. They could not differentiate a noun from a verb as
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in *Instagram branding optimize instead of the optimization of branding using Instagram or the branding optimization using Instagram.

In example # 79, instead of writing the absence of the manager of the social media, the subjects typed *the absent of the manager of the social media. They misused the adjective absent to be the noun, and they also failed to form correct NPs as in *social media manager absence, *social media’s manager absence, *the absence of social media’s manager.

In example # 58, the subjects were asked to correct the NP *That snow covering mountain. This NP had the HN mountain and this mountain was in fact covered with snow, which was expressed in passive voice. Thus, snow covering should be corrected into snow covered. However, these active-passive forms might be confusing to the subjects because they did not master the active/passive notion.

b) Limited vocabulary repertoire or lack of vocabulary also caused the subjects to have problems in using the English NPs. For example, in expressing a vivid program in # 83, the subjects wrote a program that life, and a living program. The subjects were not aware that the meanings of life and living were not the same as vivid. The word life semantically dealt with a biological condition of a person, an animal or a plant to grow, to reproduce, or to do activities as being opposite to ‘death’, and the word living means ‘not dead, being active’ referring to a person, an animal or a plant; whereas, the word vivid indicates ‘producing clear pictures in one’s mind’, as the writer of the report suggested the company made a program on the Instagram for the company’s marketing strategy.

Another example was # 67, in which ‘some correlated theories’ was incorrectly written instead of ‘some related theories’. The word ‘correlated’ refers to a mutual relationship between two or more things or one thing causes another, while
the word ‘related’ refers to sharing common things. The text indicates that some
theories could be used to discuss the topic being raised in the report. Thus, the word
‘related’ should have been used to replace the word ‘correlated’.

c) Lack of time to internalize all the English NP patterns in the modules of Writelogue is
also one cause of the subjects’ problem with the English NPs learned. The online
platform Writelogue also indicated that there were several research subjects who
skipped the exercises in the modules. They did not complete the exercises; they only
did the pre-test, watched the tutorial video, joined the tutorials, and did the post-test.
In fact, they needed to review the explanation, do the exercises, and practice using the
patterns on their own. This is in line with what Rao (2019) states that students who
get good command over the learned grammatical structures can use them in their
real-life situations in either spoken or written form. For this purpose, ample time
should be provided for the students to use the learned structures productively, as
confirmed by Beare (2020) who believes that it is important for English learners to
fully grasp grammar rules and exceptions before practicing usage themselves.

CONCLUSION

The research results show that, to some extent, the increase from the subjects’ pre-test
scores to their post-test scores proves that the developed English NP modules (containing the
tutorial videos along with exercises) in Writelogue have helped the research subjects
understand the English NP patterns better.

Further analysis, however, reveals that forming English NPs still seems to be difficult
for them. In this research, many of the subjects’ inability in forming NPs is manifested by
the mistakes they make in the post-test, even though they have completed the modules of the
eight English NPs in Writelogue. There are several causes of this problem: lack of basic
English grammar knowledge, limited vocabulary repertoire, and insufficient time for them to practice using the learned patterns.

It is, therefore, important that teachers of English provide their students with more practice with basic English grammar and vocabulary. Later, when learning the patterns of English NPs using the modules in Writelogue, more time should be allocated for the students to internalize each of the NP patterns and do all the exercises independently.

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