EIGHTH GRADERS’ GRAMMAR DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING RECOUNT TEXT

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ABSTRACT: This descriptive quantitative research was aimed to investigate the accuracy of using the past tense in writing recount texts and the acquisition order of the past tense as revealed from a writing assessment given to the eight graders of SMPN 5 Malang. The results of the acquisition orders reflected the studentsgrammar difficulties in writing recount texts. The obligatory analysis percentage showed, the students had the same acquisition order. They acquired the past irregular form at the first place, the past regular form at the second place, and the last is the past copula form.

Keywords: Grammar, Obligatory Occasion Analysis, Past Tenses, Recount Texts.

The accuracy of a language is determined by the rules of structure as word components, and without the organizational structure imposed on communicative purposes, the language would simply be disorganized, as stated by Brown (2007: 420). When we write, we generate our ideas and thoughts then put the ideas into written forms. However, we have to be aware of language grammatical rules so we may convey clearly the messages of our ideas in the written form for a communicative purpose. That is why, it is important for the foreign language learners to be taught the structures or grammar especially in composing their own writing production. The considerations of learning grammar by DiEE and QCA (1991: 21, in Eve English and John Williamson, 2005: 69) lie on how word choices and orders are crucial to meaning, the nature and use of nouns, verbs, and pronouns, how ideas may be linked in sentences and how sequences of sentences fit together. Haudeck (1996, as cited in Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam, 2011:72) has reported that many learners have difficulty in internalizing grammar rules, although these have been taught intensively. Lado’s (1957:59, as cited in Bennu, 2012:1) theory indicates that those structures that are different will be difficult because when transferred they will not function satisfactorily in the foreign language and will therefore have to be changed.

Unfortunately, the teaching of grammar in the Indonesian context cannot stand alone as a learning topic in the classroom since it has to be done simultaneously with text genres. The focus on these text genres causes some English curricula put aside for grammar instruction. As regards to the subject of this research, which is eight graders of junior high, there are three types of texts: descriptive, recount, and exposition (2006 Standard Competence). Each text type uses different grammatical forms, namely, tenses and this form becomes the most problematic matter for English learners since it is totally different from Indonesian grammatical systems (Robison, 2008:3). Knowing this fact, the researcher decides to conduct a study on eight graders, grammar difficulties in
writing recount texts. To be able to find a result of language accuracy achieved by the students when they do their writing activity, the researcher uses Obligatory occasion analysis method. This method is meant to examine how accurately learners use specific linguistic (usually grammatical) features by counting the tokens of the target morpheme and its obligatory occasions (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005:73). The grammar aspect examined here is past tenses which are past copula, past regular and past irregular used in recount writing, as regards to the writing standard competence for eight graders of junior high in basic competence 12.2 (SMPN 5 Malang English syllabus for grade eight semester 2, 2011).

There are two studies concerning the order of acquisitions using obligatory occasion analysis which were considered relevant to this study, i.e. Rif’ah’s (2012) and Muzakki’s (2012) studies.

Rif’ah (2012) conducted a study using obligatory occasion analysis to determine the use of past regular and past irregular forms in recount texts produced by VIII grade of SMPN 1 Bojonegoro. The results of the study from the two groups of students, which were based on the number or words they write in recount text shows that both of the groups have a higher percentage of accuracy for the past irregular than past regular form.

The second study by Muzakki (2012) also used the same analysis technique to explore the acquisition of obligatory grammatical elements which were verb –ing, plural, articles, and subject verb agreement from English Department students” essay writing. The result showed that the highest rank in the order scored is 100% which was the subject verb agreement, and the lowest rank is 47,8% which is the verb –ing. It showed that every grammatical element had different acquisition orders on its sub items.

Compared to the previous studies, this study employed the same analysis to seek learners” accuracy and acquisition order of certain morphemes. However, the results of accuracy and acquisition order in this study were used to determine learners” difficulties of using past tenses in their recount writings..

In this research, the researcher formulated two research questions: (1) How accurately did class 8.2 and 8.3 of SMP Negeri 5 Malang use the past tenses in writing recount texts? and (2) How were students” acquisition orders of obligatory grammatical elements on the use of past copula, past regular and past irregular?

The result of this study would give practical contribution to the teachers to pay more attention to the students” problem in constructing sentences especially in the areas of past verb tenses and for the future researchers to investigate students” problem in more specific part of English structures which are not covered in the study.

METHOD

This research was carried out to find the description of eight graders grammar difficulties, especially in using past tenses, in writing recount text. This study is classified as descriptive quantitative research based on the definition stated by Ary et al, (1985:322) that descriptive research is designed to obtain current status of phenomena and is directed toward determining the nature of
situation as exists at the time of the study. It involves the description, recording, analysis, and interpretation of condition that exist.

In this study, the researcher intended to identify what grammatical difficulties, in terms of morphemes usage, especially in using past tenses which are made by the students in recount texts. The researcher tried to find out the accuracy and the acquisition orders of the three morphemes, which are past copula, past irregular and past regular which were obtained from students’ recount writing products.

The students were given two different topics as the writing prompt and they had to choose one of the topics for their written texts. The first topic was about students’ time with their friends. Students in the VIII grade certainly had so many experiences with their school mates that they spent together and it could be an unforgettable one. The second topic was about the best place that the students have ever visited; they might have experienced it with their families or friends. The two topics were chosen for the research because the students had written almost similar topics when they were in the first semester. So, it would be easier for them to generate their ideas into writing. After the students chose one of the topics, they were asked to make a simple essay of maximum two paragraphs or minimum 200 words and this task should be done individually. It took the students approximately 60 minutes to complete the task.

After the researcher obtained all the students’ recount writing texts, the data were analyzed using obligatory occasion analysis. In conducting an obligatory occasion analysis, the researcher began with outlining the basic procedure for conducting an obligatory occasion analysis and its modification to take account of learners’ overuse of morphemes (i.e. target-like use analysis). The procedure was used to calculate the accuracy scores in investigating the variable use of three morphemes (past copula, irregular past tense, and regular past tense) by counting the tokens of the target morpheme. As obligatory occasion analysis has been used to determine the order of acquisition, the result was used to find out students’ difficulties in grammar by using its acquisition order of three morphemes.

FINDINGS

Obligatory Occasion Analysis for the Three Morphemes

Based on the result of the two classes” total scores on the three past tense morphemes accuracy, class 8.2 produced more obligatory occasion for each morpheme than 8.3. Yet, both classes produced the same number of overused morphemes for past regular form. Although class 8.2 had more occasions for each morpheme than class 8.3, they use it less accurately for the past copula and the past irregular forms. While class 8.3 had fewer occasions for the three morphemes, they could use it more accurately for the past copula and the past irregular forms. However, there is a different result for the past regular form between the two classes. The accuracy score of class 8.2’s regular form is higher than of class 8.3 although they produced the same number of overused morphemes. The results are shown in the table below.
Table 3.1 Total Score of Obligatory Occasion Analysis of Three Past Tense Morphemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Past Copula</th>
<th>Past Irregular</th>
<th>Past regular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OC</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>OU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Order of Acquisition for the Three Morphemes

After the results of accuracy scores were obtained, the next step to do was using rank-ordering method to show the students’ learning order for the three morphemes. This acquisition order was used to answer the second statement of the problem. The morpheme with the highest accuracy score was placed at the top while the morpheme with the lowest accuracy score was placed at the bottom.

The accuracy scores results showed both classes had the same acquisition order. They acquired the past irregular form at the first place, the past regular form at the second place, and the last is the past copula form. For class 8.2, the students acquired the past irregular and the past regular almost together because the percentage differs only 0.05 per cent. However, since the percentage of the past irregular form was higher than of the past regular form, it was put at the first rank of acquisition. Unlike class 8.2, class 8.3 had an obvious difference of acquisition between past irregular and past regular form. The percentage between the past irregular and the past regular form differed 8 per cent. As a result, the past irregular form was put in the first rank while the past regular form was put in the second rank. The results of rank-ordering method for the two classes are shown in Table 3.2 and Table 3.3.

Table 3.2 The Class 8.2 Accuracy Order for Three Past Tense Morphemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morpheme</th>
<th>Group accuracy score</th>
<th>Rank Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past Irregular</td>
<td>74.07%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Regular</td>
<td>74.02%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Copula</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 The Class 8.3 Accuracy Order for Three Past Tense Morphemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morpheme</th>
<th>Group accuracy score</th>
<th>Rank Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past Irregular</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Regular</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Copula</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Implicational Scaling for the Three Morphemmes

The data in the implicational scaling matrix shows that there were more numbers of students in both groups who had acquired the past irregular form than the past regular form. So, in order to make a staircase, the past regular form was placed in the first column while the past irregular form was placed in the second column. But the data did not fit into a perfect staircase. The data show that there were some students who acquired the past regular form yet they do not acquire the past irregular form. Therefore, to predict accurately which morpheme each student has acquired on the basis of his/her rank in the matrix, the researcher calculated the coefficient reproducibility (Crep.). A crep score of 75 per cent or higher indicated that the proposed scaling was valid.

From the implicational scaling matrix of class 8.2, it shows that there were errors in the scaling. The crep score is, therefore, 90 per cent. Since the crep score is higher than 75 per cent, the proposed scaling for class 8.2 is considered valid.

In the implicational scaling of class 8.3, there are three errors. The crep is, therefore, 85 per cent. Since the crep score is higher than 75 per cent, the proposed scaling for class 8.3 is considered valid.

DISCUSSIONS

Obligatory Occasion Analysis

Based on the findings, we can see that the accuracy scores of class 8.2 for the three morphemes are below 77 per cent, which is the minimum score of KKM that has been set by the English teacher in SMPN 5 Malang. Those numbers show us clearly that class 8.3 has a higher percentage of accuracy of past irregular only than class 8.2. But, we cannot conclude that the students in class 8.3 learn those three morphemes better than the students in class 8.2 since each group has different number of occasions and suppliances of the three morphemes.

The analysis results obtained from the two classes writing products show that both classes had mostly failed to use the past copula form. The students might use many occasions for the past copula, but the correct suppliance is very few; sometimes there would be no correct suppliance appear. Another thing is that the students were not consistent to use past tenses in their writing. In the beginning of their writing, they used the three past tense morphemes mostly correct. However, when they use the same verbs for other sentences in their writing, they forgot to change it into past form; especially when the verbs appear after conjunction „and”, „before”, and „after”. This phenomenon supports Ellis’s (1997:24) theory that in the case of past tense, at any one time a learner may mark some verbs correctly, but fail to mark others at all. Also, when two verbs appear in a sentence and they use word „to” to separate it, they would change the verb after the word „to” into past tense.

From both classes, the past irregular form has the higher level of accuracy that of the other two morphemes. This because students tend to use the same verbs frequently, such as „went”, „took”, and „ate”. It supports the input hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1978), that language acquisition takes place because there is comprehensible input. The students automatically learn the necessary grammar
if they get understandable and enough frequency of the input from the teacher. However, this is different from Ellis’s (1997:24) theory of grammar acquisition that the learners find it difficult to use past tenses to mark verbs that refer to activities; as we can see that the most frequent used verbs by the students are action verbs. The more they practice to use a form, the better and more accurate they use the form.

The Accuracy/Learning Order for the Three Morphemes

According to Dulay and Burt (1973), Krashen (1977, as cited in Troike, 2006, 143), the natural order of presentation of grammatical features could be an evidence to support a phenomena of learning difficulty. Based on the result of accuracy score of both classes, the past copula form is the last to be acquired by the students. It shows that most of the students have difficulties in acquiring the past copula form.

The result of rank order of the two classes for the three morphemes is the same as the acquisition hierarchy as Krashen (1997a) suggested by grouping morphemes according to accuracy only in several part. Krashen shows that most learners acquire progressive –ing, plural –s, and copula in the first rank, auxiliary ’be’ and article in the second rank, irregular past in the third rank, and the last are regular past –ed, 3rd person singular, and possessive –s.

The result of the findings show that the irregular past forms is acquired first before the past regular forms. It can be concluded that the results support the hierarchy of L2 acquisition. Conversely, the findings shows that the past copula is acquired later than the past irregular and the past regular, the hierarchy proposed by Krashen shows that copula is acquired first. These phenomena happened as they are already discussed that the learners used the past irregular form more frequently and accurately than the past regular and the past copula. In conclusion, any difference of L2 acquisition orders results would suggest that acquisition was not subject to variation as a result of environmental differences but rather was internally driven (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005:74).

CONCLUSION

The result shows us that although the students in class 8.3 use a less number of occasions of the past copula, past regular and the past irregular forms, they use them accurately. While in the case of the students in class 8.2, they tried to use as many past forms as possible, yet they cannot use them accurately. Although the accuracy score of class 8.2 for the past regular form does not reach the minimum score of KKM that has been set, which is 75%, we cannot conclude that the students in this group do not acquire the past regular form. Therefore, the implicational scaling is carried out to demonstrate whether each morpheme has been acquired or not. In this scaling, each student has their own score. The result of this scaling shows us that there are more numbers of students class 8.2 who are considered “acquired” the past regular form than the number of students in class 8.3.

The conclusion answered the research problems

The answer for the first research problem is that students in class 8.2 achieved higher score only for the past regular form. Meanwhile the students in class 8.3 achieved a higher percentage of scores for the past copula and for the past irregular. Those scores were only slightly above the minimum score set by the school, there was also one that did not even reach the minimum score. Then, we can say that the students needed more input and practice in using the past copula, the past regular and past irregular forms.
SUGGESTIONS

For teachers, especially those in SMP 5 Malang, it is suggested that they pay more attention to the students’ problems in constructing sentences especially in the areas of past verb tenses which are different from Indonesian structure. By knowing the students problems, the teachers are expected to improve their teaching and find some techniques to overcome the problems. Teachers should not only give the rule of English structures. Instead, they should say how the language is used not how it should be used. Teachers should give not just a brief verbal description about the rule. The rule is should be combination of wide range of natural examples and verbal descriptions. The natural example helps the students to see how the language is used; good verbal description helps students to understand the significance of particular point of usage. After giving good explanation, teacher is suggested to give more practice to the students. Especially for the eighth graders’ teachers, it is suggested that they pay more attention to the grammatical problems made by the eighth grade. Since the factual data can serve as the reference in what area the students do not master English sentence structure, the 8th grade English teacher can make preparation for the students to face the future final examination based on the difficult grammatical items found in this study.

For future researchers, it is suggested that they use more than one class as the subject with different level of achievement since the subject of the study used only two classes and is also considered good in achievement. It would be better if they include 9th grade students as well. The next researchers are also expected to investigate students’ problems in greater part of English structures which are not covered in this study since it will provide both teachers and students to overcome the problems in using structures.

REFERENCES


