

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Background of the Study

Although education system and resources to study English have been better these days, unsatisfactory English skills, especially writing, are still among vital issues to deal with by many Indonesian postgraduate students or student candidates, especially those pursuing a degree from universities abroad (Damanik, 2013; Indriani & Nodia, 2017; Rubiyantoro, 2015). In line with such notion, current reports indicated that the failure in the selection process of many student candidates from Indonesia is not always due to their academic eligibility, but is commonly because of insufficient scores of a standardized English proficiency test, such as International English Language Testing System or IELTS, which nowadays has become a popular high-stakes test and may have brought some impact on many aspects, including education and its policy (Indriani & Nodia, 2017; Kubiszyn & Borich, 2003; Rubiyantoro, 2015).

While it is commonly accepted that more than language competence is needed for a successful study at university (Yang & Badger, 2015), and IELTS score, particularly that of the writing section, may not be expected to meet some specific needs of students preparing for a certain academic course or profession, the assessment criteria of IELTS are perceived to be able to capture central qualities of a writing composition, such as accuracy, clarity, relevance, conciseness, tone precision, and attention on key-points (A. Green, 2005; Knoch, May, Macqueen, Pill, & Storch, 2016). Further, the second task of IELTS writing section, which provides an opportunity to present and develop an organized argument in order to communicate their position to the reader (Archibald, 2001), is generally perceived to be able to elicit a wide range of cognitive processes and writing behaviors (Révész, Michel, & Lee, 2017), to have a positive effect on class-based writing skills, and to bear a reasonable relationship with skills needed

in general academic situation (A. Green, 2005; Lewthwaite, 2007; Woodrow, 2006; Yang & Badger, 2015). In some way, it is not surprising that a strong encouragement from one of the general directorates of the ministry of education and culture of Indonesia is directed to English language centers or courses in Indonesia to improve the quality of their institute, their students, and the competence of their teaching staffs, especially those related to IELTS preparation courses (Rubiyantoro, 2015).

Along with the expectation for improvement, some studies suggest that IELTS preparation program has brought positive changes to its students not only on their IELTS scores (Mohseni & Satariyan, 2013; Rao, McPherson, Chand, & Khan, 2003; Xie, 2013), but also on their confidence in using English for academic socialization (Yang & Badger, 2015). Dealing with the quality of the students' writing, to be more precise, such improvement was at some points stimulated owing to practices or drilling method used in instruction (Xie, 2013), vocabulary focused language learning (Mohseni & Satariyan, 2013), exposure and discussion on sample answers, prefabricated expressions and patterns, prerequisite grammar and vocabularies, discourse markers, and encouragement to develop content knowledge (Ostovar-Namaghi & Safaee, 2017). As a result of the effective instruction, it could also be identified that higher-scored writing scripts produced at later test occasions are likely to be longer with greater lexical diversity and lexical sophistication, greater syntactic complexity, more self-mentions, and fewer contractions (Barkaoui, 2016). Taken as a whole, it can be inferred that the development of a participant's writing as a result of training given in an IELTS preparation course may occur in diverse areas, through different measures, and also with some possible extra inputs and outputs.

Although IELTS preparation has been proved to bring thriving results, studies examining the success of test preparation courses generally were only based on changes in test scores (pre-test and post-test scores) and did not examine whether there is an association between the score changes and changes in the linguistic characteristics of the students (Barkaoui, 2016). Among earlier studies related to IELTS preparation courses, limitations still do exist, specifically dealing

with the use of computer program that cannot measure some qualities from the students' writing scripts and no consideration on the practice effects or instruction or preparation the students may take between each test occasion (Barkaoui, 2016), no portrayal on broader possible aspects of development that might be present during the process and other contributing factors that the students may have (Mohseni & Satariyan, 2013), and no detailed reflection on how students applied techniques demonstrated by experienced teachers and how significant their contribution to students' writing development (Ostovar-Namaghi & Safaee, 2017). Here reconsideration has to be made that a participant or a student's learning toward a test, including IELTS, may be influenced not only by the teaching process, but also by other extrinsic or intrinsic factors or test factor itself (A. Green, 2006a; Shih, 2007). Therefore, to address such limitations, this research employed an analysis to identify and elaborate not only longitudinal changes of writing aspects before and after taking IELTS preparation course, but also how students' writing learning process ongoing over time in relation to the influence from the test to take, although the scope of the study is limited to smaller site and samples.

## 1.2. Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent did the students develop their writing ability in the IELTS preparation course?
2. What factors influenced the students' learning process for IELTS writing task 2?
3. In what ways did those factors influence the students' learning process for IELTS writing task 2?

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

This research is designed to analyze writing development reflected in IELTS Writing Task 2 scripts of the course students and their potential contributing factors. This topic is considered crucial considering the issue of the ineffectiveness of instruction to improve students' scores, and greater difficulty that course students, especially from Indonesia, may encounter from the writing section of the test (A. Green, 2005; Zhengdong, 2009). Therefore, the analysis on the students' responses to the writing tasks given could reflect whether or not they were able to make improvements in their writing by participating in the preparation program, and also examine the aspects of improvements in their writing composition.

Considering the concept of washback, specifically on its influence on learners, it is also likely that the success or the difficulty students encountered to respond the writing task was influenced by various factors, including those from the learners themselves, from some external contributors (person or non-person), or from the test itself (Shih, 2007). Therefore, further analysis was conducted qualitatively to investigate such factors and how they influenced the students and their learning process for IELTS writing task 2. It is believed that to provide an effective pedagogical process in language instruction, understanding on social and cognitive factors in the process, such as those found from this study, becomes a crucial factor because it will noticeably contribute to the development of the students' writing (Myles, 2002).

### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

In professional context, this study is considered having noteworthy results for students, teachers, and policy makers, especially those involved in a test preparation program similar to one conducted for this research. Students being the respondents of this research could receive more detailed examination on their strengths and weaknesses from the evaluation of their writing. The results can also

become a reference for their teachers to improve their evaluation method, to give more relevant and helpful feedback, and to employ better approaches in teaching and learning process of IELTS preparation. Other students and teachers in general can use this case study as a reference for improvement in the event if they need to deal with similar condition. Further examinations on the influential factors on the learning process of the students are also useful for students to optimize influences positive for their development, for the teachers to do self-reflection based on students' point of view, and for policy makers or program designers to make improvement on the next programs similar to one conducted in this study.

In theoretical aspect, the result of the research is also expected to support the washback effect, the influence of a test on teaching and learning (Fulcher, 2010; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; A. Green, 2006a; Harmer, 2007; Shih, 2007), of the IELTS preparation course positively since writing development may manifest classroom curriculum and pedagogy, and narrowing them during the learning process, such as through writing drilling practice, will better possibly lead to improving test result (Schultz & Fecho, 2000; Xie, 2013). This expectation was made possible as one of the analysis methods implemented in this research was based on a washback model of students' learning from Shih (2007). In addition, this research was expected to enhance the resources of studies exploring learners' outlook over a test which is still considered limited (Bailey, 1999), and to expand the results of a similar study on students' writing development previously obtained through a quantitative approach (Barkaoui, 2016).

### **1.5. Scope of the Study**

The coverage of this research is limited to the analysis of writing development of the IELTS preparation course students and prospective factors to the learning process. Although writing development is multi-dimensional (Camp, 2012), the analysis was particularly focused on the development based on the assessment criteria of IELTS writing task 2 due to the small scale of site and students involved in an IELTS preparation program conducted in a language center in

Bandung, Indonesia. Additionally, another limitation of this study is that factors contributing to the development were analyzed only from students' perspective though as a matter of fact teachers, administrators, material developers, and even publishers can also be influenced by the test (Bailey, 1996, 1999). With such characteristics involving individuals of a system bounded by space and time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006), this research was designed as a case study, and therefore, the results may not be generalized in the conventional sense as a representative of some larger population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001).

## 1.6. Definition of Terms

To clarify the aim of this research, several key terms are defined and specified as follows:

1. IELTS which stands for International English Language Testing System is a test jointly owned and developed by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and Cambridge Assessment English. IELTS is used to measure test takers' four-skills-of-English-language proficiency to study or work in countries or institutions where English is the language used, and correspondingly it comes in two versions; academic and general training. This study itself is centered on the academic version which is designed to assess the readiness of candidates to study through the medium of English (A. Green, 2006a; IELTS, 2018; Liu, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2018).
2. High-stakes testing is a test system with serious consequences for students or educators. In other words, the test result may lead to a life changing decision, ranging from grade retention for school children to rewards or punitive measures for schools and school districts. IELTS is a sample of a high-stakes test with scores frequently used to determine whether a test-taker can study overseas or not, or choose one career path over another (Marchant, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2018; Woodrow, 2006).

3. A washback model of students' learning, which became one of theoretical basis in this study, was a relatively newly proposed model to fully describe the impact of a test on learning. Washback itself is one of the components of test validity which represents an impact a test may have not only on learners and teachers, but also on educational systems in general and society at large. Nonetheless, the new model used in this research was only focused on the learners. The model asserts that a number of extrinsic, intrinsic, and test factors have to be considered before the potential washback of a test can be ascertained (Lewthwaite, 2007; Shih, 2007).

### **1.7. Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis is organized into five chapters summarized and organized as follows:

Chapter I presents overall account of the study. This section comprises the background of the study, statement of the objectives of the study, significance of the study, and organization of the paper.

Chapter II assembles relevant theoretical foundation of the present study. It will comprise the explanation of concepts, theories, and models writing process, its development, and the influence of testing on teaching and learning. Besides, it provides information from relevant previous researches to be elaborated.

Chapter III elaborates the rationales of choosing research design, research site and participants, instruments, and techniques of data collection and analysis.

Chapter IV covers the findings and detailed discussion of them in relation to the research question and the research objectives.

Chapter V puts forward interpretations of the findings and discussion. Further, there are recommendations for future research and presumably better understanding on the analysis of writing development and its impact on teaching and learning process.

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*LEARNERS' WRITING ABILITY IN AN IELTS PREPARATION COURSE: A WASHBACK MODEL OF LEARNING ANALYSIS*

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