

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a report of a think-aloud protocol-based study of foreign language writing processes and strategies. The study was based primarily upon the think aloud protocols of four Indonesian tertiary level EFL students taken while they were writing an English essay. This first chapter of the thesis presents the background of the study, specifies the problems of the study, and describes its significance. The chapter concludes by noting the scope of the study, defining some special terms used, and listing the organizations of the thesis.

### 1.1. Research Background

Nowadays, English has become one of foreign languages that are important to be acquired in Indonesia, especially if it is viewed from the effect of globalization. As the language of knowledge and information, English has become an important language for international communication in the globalization era. Therefore, it is essential that our next generations be able to communicate fluently in English, both in oral and written modes. Through English mastery, they can compete with people from different parts of the world.

As stated in the introduction of KBK Bahasa Inggris SMA/MA (English Competence Based Curriculum for High School) (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2003), English writing proficiency has become one of the language teaching elements

emphasized in the national curriculum. Furthermore, it is also stated that university students are targeted to acquire English writing in various genres in both informational and epistemic levels. In informational level, students are expected to be able to access knowledge with their language proficiency; meanwhile, the epistemic level requires students to be able to express their knowledge into the target language (Wells, 1987 cited in Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2003). In the same vein, Emi Emilia (1998: 47) in one of her articles, entitled “Pendekatan Process Dalam Pengajaran Menulis (Process Approach in the Teaching of Writing)”, also argues that writing plays an important role in accelerating learning processes, building character developments, and establishing empowerments of the writers. The statements above indicate that mastering English writing proficiency has become essential for Indonesian tertiary students to help them become more successful in their study both nationally and internationally.

However, writing an English essay in a foreign language setting like in Indonesia is often perceived as a daunting task for students. This may happen because English is not used as the medium of communication among the people in daily conversation. For most EFL learners in Indonesia, writing in English tends to be secondary, i.e. it is only done during classroom writing activities with limited exposures of authentic written expressions. In a similar vein, Nunan (1999: 271) states that it is a big challenge for second/foreign language learners to produce “a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing”, since the rhetorical conventions of texts—i.e. structure, style, and organization— of different languages are often different

from one another. Therefore, they need to apply some efforts (strategies) in order to recognize and manage the differences (Leki, 1991) found in the process of writing an English essay. The challenge in writing an English essay above was also found in the participants' process of writing in this study. They seemed to have problems in finding the right words that are relevant to their intended meanings as well as organizing their ideas into a coherent, fluent, and extended essay. In order to cope with those problems, they applied some strategies.

As has been noted by Alister Cumming (2001) in his review on the last two decades studies of how people learn to write in a second language, many studies have been conducted to reveal the processes and strategies of second/foreign language writing (see also Dyson & Freedman, 1991). Most of the studies (e.g. Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1987; Skibniewski, 1988; Hirose & Sasaki, 1994; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Victori, 1997; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 1999, 2001, 2008; Sasaki, 2000; Hu & Chen, 2006) base their theories on the cognitive models of English as a first language writing processes and strategies (e.g. Emig, 1971; Stallard, 1974; Perl, 1978, 1979; Pianko, 1979; Sommers, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1980, 1981; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), with the belief that basically there are similarities between first and second language writing processes and strategies (see Zamel, 1976; Skibniewski & Skibniewska, 1986; Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1987; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Fagan & Hayden, 1988; Skibniewski, 1988; Moragne e Silva, 1989 for further analysis on the similarities and differences between first and second language writing processes and strategies). Therefore, in the present study, two basic models of cognitive processes

and strategies of first language writing studies (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987) were also employed as the basic theories. This decision was taken since both of them were relevant to the topic of this study, i.e. cognitive processes and strategies in writing.

However, in the second/foreign language writing process, as were also found in the participants' writing processes of the present study, it was found that writers tend to pay much attention to decisions about the right form/structure as well as to searching for appropriate words in the second language (Cumming, 2001: 5). This is in line with Silva (1993)'s statement that compared to first language writing, second language writing is "strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in important ways" (p. 669). Those second/foreign language problems may constrain writers' attention to formulate complex ideas, their capacity to cope with the high knowledge demand situations, and the scope of their planning (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Fagan & Hayden, 1988; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Whalen & Menard, 1995; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 1999; Cumming, 2001). To deal with the constraints, the writers need to apply a set of strategies that can be used to manage the second/foreign language problems in the writing process.

Furthermore, one of meta-cognitive researchers in writing studies, Gerring (1990) suggests that "writing is a highly complex enterprise, one which requires the knowledge and regulation of many cognitive activities" (p.1, cited in Chen, 2003: 1). In this case, the cognitive activities may include many complex and repetitive strategies. Among others are retrieving information from memory, analyzing readers'

needs, determining genre and writing style, brainstorming for ideas related to the topics, planning structure and content before and while writing, organizing ideas, adjusting wording and sentence patterns, reassessing and revising the written text, and confirming the whole text with writer's goal for the task. Those activities, which were regulated by their meta-cognitive knowledge, were also found in the pre-writing, writing, and post-writing stages of the participants' processes of writing in the present study. As suggested by several researchers in second/foreign language learning and writing strategies, meta-cognitive strategies are the key to successful language learning (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990; Chamot, 2004) and are directly responsible for the execution of cognitive activities, such as reading and writing (Wenden, 1991; Mu, 2007). Therefore, more research on meta-cognitive strategies in second/foreign language writing process, as what was concerned in this study, should be conducted.

As far as the researcher is concerned, most studies in second/foreign language writing process have compared the processes and strategies of skilled and unskilled (e.g. Zamel, 1983; Skibniewski & Skibniewska, 1986; Raimes, 1987; Skibniewski, 1988; Sasaki, 2000, etc.) or between good and poor (e.g. Victori, 1997) writers, based on their cognitive style and capacity, writing experience, and personality. However, the present study examined the differences of meta-cognitive strategies used by higher- and lower-scored writers with different levels of English language proficiency. Different with the previous study, the determinations between higher- and lower-scored writers here were made based on the scores of participants' writing

products. This decision was taken in order to compare the processes and the products of writing strategies used. As stated by some researchers on learning strategies (e.g. Brown & Palinscar, 1982; Brown, 1980; and Wenden, 1991, 1993) cited in Victori (1997: 179), there is direct relation between meta-cognitive strategies and more successful language learning. Thus, the scores of the writing products may become the indicators of success in this study to be related with the use of meta-cognitive strategies. Besides, different writers with different levels of language proficiency may perform different strategic behaviors in their writing processes (see Roca de Larios *et al.*, 1999; Manchon *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, this thesis focused on investigating the processes and meta-cognitive strategies used by four Indonesian tertiary level EFL student writers in their process of writing an essay in English as a foreign language based on their scores of the writing products as well as their levels of language proficiency.

Last but not least, basically there were several verbal report methods utilized by previous researchers in their investigations of writing processes and strategies (Cohen, 2001). However, this study only applied concurrent think-aloud protocols or also called “composing aloud” (Emig, 1971; Perl, 1978, 1979, 1984; Raimes, 1985, 1987), as were also done by several researchers in writing process studies (e.g. Flower and Hayes, 1980, 1981; Perl, 1978, 1979, 1984; Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1987; Whalen & Menard, 1995; Armengol-Castells, 2001; Hu & Chen, 2006; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 2008; etc.) and retrospective questionnaires taken immediately after executing the task.



The use of the two data collecting methods stated above was instigated by some reasons. First, the concurrent think-aloud protocols seemed to have been the most chosen method of data collections in the studies of writing process and strategies. This may happen because the main goal of this kind of study was to describe the patterns of processes and strategies used while writing an English essay. Besides that, this method was concerned as better than the other methods for its richness, authenticity, and less structuring of data than those gained from the others (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Jansen *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, the immediateness of the data collection time, concerning the writers' use of short term memory, had also become an advantage of this method. Through think-aloud method, "insights which are difficult or even impossible to obtain by other methods" (Hurd, 2007: 4; see also Perl, 1984: 23) could be revealed. For example, the information obtained from think-aloud method may not appear on the draft and may be forgotten by the time an interview or questionnaire takes place. Therefore, based on the considerations above, think-aloud method was chosen as the main method of gaining the data in this study.

Second, as cautioned by Adina Levine and Thea Reves (1998) in their comparative study on the uses of think-aloud protocols versus strategy questionnaires on reading and writing processes and strategies, think-aloud protocols should be applied together with another data collecting methods in order to gain the validity of the data. For this reason, think-aloud protocols in combination with post-writing questionnaires were employed as the methods in identifying the EFL student writers' processes and strategies in this study.

## **1.2. Objectives of the Study**

Based on the research background stated above, a study entitled “Writing Processes and Meta-cognitive Strategies of Four Indonesian Tertiary EFL Students” was conducted, aiming

1. To identify the processes of writing underwent by the EFL students.
2. To identify the meta-cognitive strategies used by the participants in their processes of writing an English essay.

## **1.3. Significance of the Study**

The results of the study are expected to give contributions to both the theory and practice of second/foreign language writing studies. First, this study may fill the gap of the scant of studies in think-aloud protocol based research on the process and strategy of writing conducted in foreign language context, especially in Indonesia. As has been noticed by Guangwei Hu and Bo Chen (2006), most studies with the aims of revealing the processes and strategies of writing were conducted in western educational settings involving ESL learners. Even though much research has been conducted in EFL settings, most of them were in Chinese (e.g. Wang & Wen, 2002; Hu & Chen, 2006; etc.), Polish (e.g. Skibniewski & Skibniewska, 1986; Skibniewski, 1988; etc.), and Spanish (e.g. Victori, 1997, 1999; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 1999, 2001, 2006, 2008; Armengol-Castells, 2001; Roca de Larios & Murphy, 2001; Manchon, *et al.*, 2005; etc.) language settings. Therefore, research to uncover the complex patterns of writing process and strategy used by foreign language writers in Indonesian



context and language setting is needed in order to add information to the theory of writing in the country.

Second, the information provided from the results of the study is expected to lead to the enhancement of writing teachers/lecturers' reflections of their current practices. The reflections may enable teachers/lecturers to adapt their approaches in teaching English writing with more considerations to their learners' awareness of thinking about their writing process and strategies. Moreover, this may also raise the issue of 'teach-ability' of meta-cognitive composing strategies in order to empower learners with control of their compositions. This study investigates the processes as well as meta-cognitive strategies used by students in writing an English essay. By having identified the processes and strategies used by the students in the process of writing an essay, English writing teachers can introduce the processes and teach the strategies to them, so that they can help the students adapt to the target discourse community more quickly.

#### **1.4. Scope of the Study**

This study focused on a think-aloud protocol-based study of four Indonesian tertiary level EFL student writers taken while they were writing an English argumentative essay. Based on the analyses of participants' writing products, the participants involved in this study were categorized as having higher and lower scores of writing. Besides, they also have different levels of language proficiency, from low intermediate to advanced (based on Proficiency Test of English for Speakers of Other Languages (hereafter PTESOL) test taken a week before the data collection time).

Previous studies on process and strategies of second/foreign language writing (e.g. Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 1999; Manchon *et al.*, 2000; Sasaki, 2004; etc.) have shown that different writers may perform different strategic behavior in their processes of writing a second language essay. Furthermore, those studies have also indicated that the level of language proficiency may influence the processes and strategies used in writing an essay in a second/foreign language. Therefore, this study investigates the processes as well as meta-cognitive strategies used by the participants with higher and lower scores of writing, besides their different levels of language proficiency.

#### **1.5. Definitions of Terms**

To avoid misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or ambiguities of several terms used in the study, the researcher defines the terms as follows:

1. Writing processes: the stages gone through by writers as they compose, as suggested by experts in writing process studies (e.g. Emig, 1971; Perl, 1978, 1979, 1981; Pianko, 1979; Stallard, 1979; Hayes & Flower, 1980; Murray, 1980; Sommers, 1980; Murray, 1982; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Zamel, 1983; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Skibniewski, 1988; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 2001, 2008).
2. Writing strategies: various strategies/methods employed by writers in their composing processes in order to generate ideas, plan, draft, organize, evaluate revise, and to reduce constraints faced while writing (Cummings, 1989, 2001; Victori, 1997; Manchon, 2001; Mu, 2007).

3. Meta-cognitive strategies: strategies applied by second/foreign language learners that entail planning for, monitoring, and/or evaluating the success of a learning activity (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990: 44), and are directly responsible for the execution of a writing task (Wenden, 1991; Mu, 2007: 9).
4. Think-aloud protocols: "rich data sources" consisting of subjects' "spoken thoughts" (Ericsson & Simon, 1980) associated with working on a task.

#### **1.6. Thesis Organization**

This thesis consists of five chapters with the organization presented as follows:

- Chapter I discusses the introduction dealing with the background of the research, the objectives of the study, the research methodology in brief, the significance of the study, the scope of the study, the definitions of the terms, and the organization of the thesis.
- Chapter II discusses the literature review underpinning the values of writing in general, the theories of writing process and strategy based on previous studies in second language writing processes and strategies; as well as the use of think-aloud protocols in the studies of writing processes and strategies.
- Chapter III discusses the research methodology in detail dealing with the research questions.

Chapter IV discusses the data presentation, analyses, and findings of the results, based on those obtained from the think-aloud protocols and post-writing questionnaires.

Chapter V discusses the conclusions, limitations and recommendations for the next research.

