

Challenges Faced and Factors Affecting Improvement: First-Year Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing

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Abstrak

Penulisan akademik adalah salah satu mata kuliah wajib yang harus diambil mahasiswa tahun pertama. Ini bisa sangat menantang, mengingat para siswa mungkin tidak pernah mengambil kursus semacam itu di sekolah menengah. Penelitian ini berusaha untuk memahami keakraban siswa dengan penulisan akademik dan menentukan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi peningkatan penulisan akademik mahasiswa sarjana. Studi deskriptif ini menggunakan multi metode yang menggabungkan kuantitatif dan kualitatif, menggunakan kuesioner tertutup dan terbuka sebagai sumber data utama. Pesertanya adalah 129 mahasiswa S1 tahun pertama jurusan Ilmu Politik dan mengambil mata kuliah penulisan akademik di semestersatu. Analisis data menunjukkan bahwa meskipun sebagian besar siswa sudah familiar dengan jenis dan struktur tulisan akademik, mereka tidak memahami bagaimana membangun paragraf pendahuluan dan isi yang kuat. Penelitian ini juga mengungkap faktor intrinsik dan ekstrinsik yang mempengaruhi peningkatan kemampuan menulis akademik siswa. Implikasi praktis dari penelitian ini ada dua. Pertama, universitas perlu memeriksa dan meningkatkan silabus mata kuliah penulisan akademik sehingga mahasiswa dapat merasakan pengalaman belajar yang lebih baik yang mengarah pada peningkatan pemahaman penulisan akademik. Kedua, mahasiswa harus mulai lebih bertanggung jawab dalam pembelajaran menulis akademik mereka daripada hanya mengandalkan dosen untuk mendapatkan informasi.

Kata Kunci: Penulisan Akademik, Esai, faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kemajuan, persepsi siswa

Abstract

Academic writing is one of the required courses that first-year students must undertake. It can be particularly challenging, considering the students might have never taken such a course in high school. This study sought to understand students' familiarity with academic writing and determine the factors affecting undergraduate students' academic writing improvement. This descriptive study used multi methods combining quantitative and qualitative, employing both closed and open-ended questionnaires as the main data source. The participants were 129 first-year undergraduate students majoring in Political Science and taking an academic writing course in semester one. Data analysis showed that while most students were familiar with the types and structures of academic writing, they did not understand how to build strong introductory and body paragraphs. This study also revealed intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting students' academic writing improvement. The practical implications of this study were twofold. Firstly, the university needs to examine and improve the academic writing course syllabus so students can taste a better learning experience leading to an improved understanding of academic writing. Secondly, students should start taking more responsibility for their academic writing learning instead of just relying on the lecturers for information.

Keywords: *Academic Writing, Essay, factors affecting improvement, student perceptions.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing becomes significantly essential, especially in the context of tertiary education, regardless of the level. Researchers generally support the idea that academic writing skills are beneficial as they can support student success in academic life, especially when there is a prerequisite to writing academic papers as the requirement of their degree. Therefore, almost all HE institutions globally provide academic writing courses for their students. Student writing can be considered the heart of student learning as it can serve multiple purposes. For instance, student writing can be used as a form of assessment where lecturers can evaluate student understanding of the course content and their ability to construct logical arguments and use language properly. In addition, it can also be used by students to reflect on their learning process (Curry & Lillis, 2003).

While students are often encouraged to be competent in writing, most students find it challenging to understand and engage in academic writing aspects. Students' incompetence in using English is one of the main reasons for the difficulty. In the case of Indonesia, the lack of ability to write in English can be traced back to the education system and school curriculum, which are heavily test-oriented. It causes students to focus more on getting good scores than developing their skills. In a study investigating the teaching of writing in

Indonesia, Ariyanti (2016) found that one of the challenges was a massive gap between students' mother tongue and English as the writing process was complex - it included brainstorming, outlining, prewriting, and editing. Another barrier was a large number of students in the class, which hindered students from understanding the materials.

Apart from the students' English language competence, psychological factors have been found by previous research to be a major factor contributing to the EFL learners in essay writing. Salikin (2019) found that lack of linguistic competence has a significant influence on students' writing anxiety. The anxiety, then, can affect their self-efficacy and motivation (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) offers a significant perspective on motivation approaches. This theory distinguishes between two distinct forms of motivation: intrinsic motivation, which arises from the inherent pleasure and fulfillment derived from an activity, and extrinsic motivation, which relates to engaging in activities driven by external factors, such as obtaining rewards or avoiding punishments. Several studies (e.g. Al Darwish & Sadeqi, 2016; Le, 2000; Tran, 2007) have indicated the substantial significance of both types of motivation on student writing performance in EFL contexts. This could be due to the fact that academic writing is a challenging task.

Academic writing is generally about writing academically or writing for educational purposes (Husin & Nurbayani, 2017). The most common types of academic writing produced by students are notes, reports, project, essay, dissertation or thesis, and paper. Among these types, essay is the most common written work of students (Bailey, 2011; Van Geyte, 2013). An essay is a written composition that focuses on a specific topic and is structured with multiple paragraphs. Each paragraph corresponds to a major point, beginning with an introductory paragraph and concluding with a concluding paragraph (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). A fundamental structure of an essay that is applicable across various academic disciplines includes a title, an introduction that informs the reader about the essay's subject, a main section (body) where the primary arguments are presented, a conclusion that evaluates the arguments in the main section and offers a final statement in response to the question, and a list of references (Redman & Maples, 2017).

Despite its importance in supporting student academic life, academic writing can be quite challenging for beginners even if it is written in the first language, not to mention when it is done in a second/foreign language such as English. Academic writing involves multiple cognitive activities. For instance, students need to understand how to organise sentences, use appropriate grammar and punctuation, and develop ideas in a paragraph in such a way that they are coherent (Ratnawati, Faridah, Anam, &

Retnaningdyah, 2018). It takes a lot of practice to develop the skills to write academically.

In the context of Indonesian higher education institutions, studies exploring undergraduate students' experiences of an academic writing course are sparse. As a matter of fact, this area is seemingly under-researched. While there have been a few studies with a focus on using technology in academic writing (Boyle, Ramsey, & Struan, 2019), exploring students' academic writing needs (Ratnawati et.al, 2018), and students' perceptions of critical thinking in academic writing (Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020), little is known about how first-year undergraduate students perceive academic writing in general, whether they are familiar with it and whether there are factors influencing their understanding of academic writing. Therefore, the current study is guided by three research questions:

1. How familiar are students with the structure of an essay?
2. How has such familiarity affected their ability to write academically?
3. What factors contributed to their understanding of academic writing? The

significance of the current study lies in its descriptive nature, highlighting the challenges students might face in learning academic writing and the factors that support their academic writing improvement.

B. METHODOLOGY

The participants of the current study were 129 first-year undergraduate students in the political science program taking an academic writing course. This course was designed for sixteen meetings in a semester, with two meetings used for examinations (meeting eight and sixteen). During the first half of the semester, meetings one to seven focused on essay writing, covering various topics from introduction to the types and structure of academic writing to writing a conclusion of an essay and the second half of the semester focused more on writing a journal article.

Participation in this study was voluntary – students were given the freedom to decide whether or not they would like to participate. They were told that they could withdraw anytime during the study without the need to provide reasons, and their absence from participating would not affect their mark or score in any way during the course. Students were provided with an explanation about the questionnaire, and they were given an opportunity to ask questions regarding the study.

This qualitative study was descriptive in nature, which aims to “describe individual events, or conditions by studying them as they are in nature” (Siedlecki, 2020, p. 8). As the name suggest, this type of study only describes the sample, not testing hypothesis. While the number of participants was quite high, the questions in the questionnaires were both , closed and open-ended .

Employing a survey is one of the data collection approaches for a descriptive study (Creswell, 2009; Siedlecki, 2020). While questionnaires are often associated with quantitative research, they can also be utilized to gather qualitative insights (Bryman, 2008), especially when open-ended questions are employed. This study employed a two-phase data collection. The participants were asked to fill out a closed questionnaire in the first phase. This phase was conducted after the third meeting of the academic writing course. Its purpose was to understand and describe students' familiarity with academic writing and the parts of academic writing that are challenging to them. All 129 students participated in filling out the first questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was to have a general idea and to understand students' familiarity of academic writing. The second phase was done after the eighth meeting (mid-semester) to capture students' perceptions of factors important to improving their academic writing. Of the 129, only 20 students participated in filling out the second questionnaire. The voluntary nature of participation might be the cause of such a small number of participations in the second questionnaire. Once gathered, the data were sorted and analysed, and presented descriptively. In presenting the findings related to the factors affecting student improvement, sample extracts from students' answers to the questionnaire were used. The reference 'P' stands for the participant; hence, P1 means Participant 1.

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

Students' familiarity with the structure of academic writing

Data analysis showed that students' familiarity with the types was inline with their familiarity with the structure of academic writing. These included academic essays, journal articles, research reports, books, and book chapters. Around 62% of students were familiar with these types, and as many as 58% were familiar with the structure of one type of academic writing, an essay (see Figures 1 and 2).

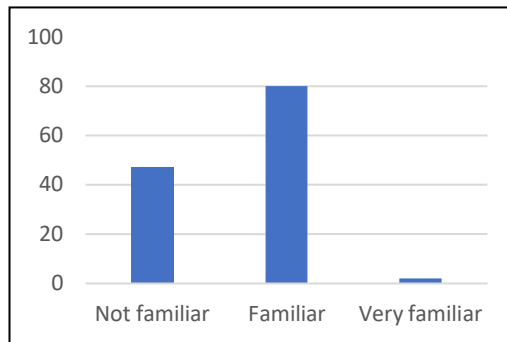


Figure 1. Students' familiarity with the types of academic writing

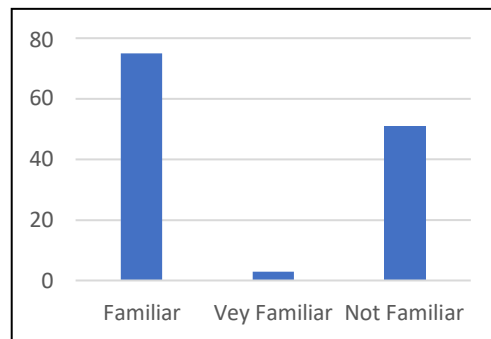


Figure 2. Students' familiarity with the structure of an essay

Students' familiarity with the structure of an essay did not automatically mean they fully understood how to construct a good essay. The majority of students had difficulties in creating the introduction and the body parts (see Figure 3). The difficulty in understanding the aspects or parts of an essay, namely the introduction, body, and both introduction and body, was evident based on the number of students who mentioned it. As many as 35 students had difficulty understanding and constructing the body parts, which include main ideas and supporting ideas. In comparison, 34 students mentioned trouble in writing the introduction part, which includes a general overview and a thesis statement. Meanwhile, fifteen students mentioned they had difficulty writing both the introduction and the body parts. Combined, these numbers made up 65% of the total participants.

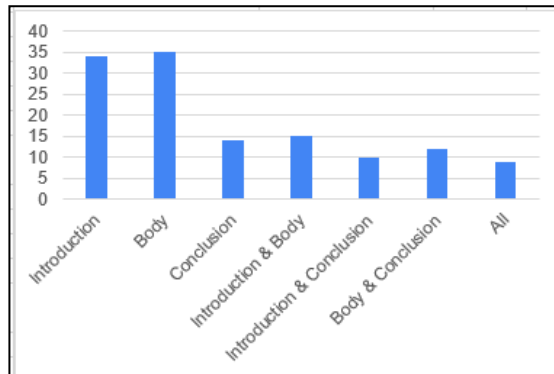


Figure 3. The most challenging parts of an essay

Factors Affecting Improvement: Intrinsic and Extrinsic

Of the 129 participants, only 20 filled out the second questionnaire. The questionnaire asked students to rank factors from the most to the least important in influencing their improved understanding of essay construction. These factors were personal motivation, the lecturer's mastery of materials, in-class activities, the syllabus, the lecturer's feedback, classroom atmosphere, and peers. Of these seven factors, personal motivation, the lecturer's mastery of materials, and the lecturer's feedback were the top three factors that students thought of as the most influential for their improvement (see Figure 5).

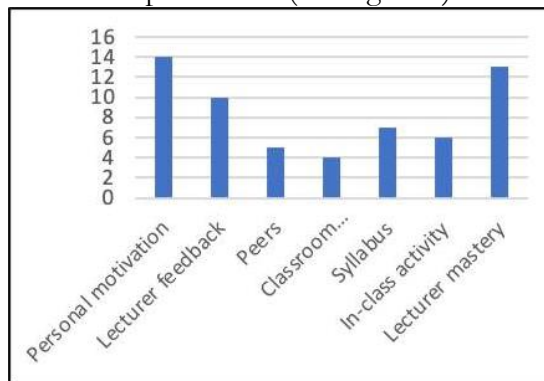


Figure 5. Factors affecting improvement

Personal Motivation

Students considered personal motivation as the number one factor which drove their improvement because motivation is "the most important" (P10), and motivation "urges me to be determined in learning" (P20). It seems that they believed that without intrinsic motivation, other factors would not work:

I think motivation is the most important in learning or doing something in general. If we have the

*motivation, other factors can support our learning (P3);
I put personal motivation on top because it is the foundation that all students should have.
Without it, nothing matters (P6);
Personal motivation is like a goal for me, that's why I put it first on the list. If I do not have a
goal, even the best lecturer cannot help me achieve great outputs (P4).*

Here, students agreed personal motivation was the utmost important aspect that every learner should have in order to move forward with their learning.

Personal motivation is an intrinsic factor that greatly influenced student improvement in academic writing was their personal motivation. Motivation has been defined as “the process to make a start, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviour” (Gopalan et al., 2017). Personal motivation was seen as the fuel which keeps students focused on attaining their learning goals. Students who have personal motivation in learning will likely to maintain and achieve their learning goals.

Lecturer's Mastery of Materials

The second factor influencing student improvement was the lecturer's mastery of materials. Students believed that if the lecturer master what they are teaching, “it will be easier to transfer the knowledge to the students and students will be easy to receive the knowledge” (P2). Other students seemed to agree and considered that lecturer mastery affect their learning in a way that it filled the gap in their knowledge:

*Because the lecturer's mastery influences how I digest the information (P1);
Lecturer's mastery of materials is really important because when the student does not know, the lecturer
can add to the student's lack of knowledge. That will help the student a lot (P19);*

In a similar vein, another student also mentioned that when a lecturer masters the materials, she/he would be able to “*explain clearly so it's easy to understand. This factor positively affects students' academic development*” (P13).

Lecturer Feedback

The third most influential factor was the lecturer feedback. Students' responses showed how the feedback from the lecturer could be linked to their motivation:

*The feedback that is clear and easy to understand is like a personal motivation for me to be better
(P7);
Good feedback from the lecturer makes me more motivated (P11).*

Other students treated the lecturer feedback as the source of knowledge which would help fill the gap in their understanding:

*I feel that the lecturer feedback can answer my confusion (P20);
Lecturer feedback is very important in learning because if I don't know something then the lecturer*

could help provide the answer or give suggestion. That is very helpful for me (P14).

In addition to motivating and filling the gap in the students' knowledge, the lecturer feedback could have an impact on student emotions. As participant 15 put it: "The lecturer feedback which does not blame or put students in the spotlight for not knowing the answer or making a mistake makes me happy". It seems that feedback which acknowledged students for participating in the learning process and was open to any responses without being judgemental positively affected student emotions.

Discussion

Students' familiarity with the structure and difficulty in writing

The findings showed that majority of students were familiar with the structure of an academic writing. While familiar with the structure, students faced a challenge when it comes to writing the introduction and body parts of an essay. An introduction generally comprises a general overview of the topic and a thesis statement (Bailey, 2018). This part of an essay needs to be clear as it determines the direction of the essay. Failure to provide a thesis statement might confuse the readers as they must figure out what the article is trying to achieve. Therefore, it is imperative to put a sentence that functions as a thesis statement. A thesis statement can be either weak or strong. The latter is usually preferable as it portrays the content of the whole essay.

No less important is the construction of the body paragraph, which should include the main ideas and supporting ideas in each paragraph (Hikmat et al., 2020). These two components are the basic foundations of constructing a solid paragraph, which is necessary for a paragraph to sound coherent. The possible factors of these being challenging for students is firstly the writing culture. In Indonesia, there has been a tendency to write at length with long, unfocused descriptions of a topic and convey the main idea in the last part of an essay. Prolonged exposure to such a style of writing might play a role in shaping student perceptions that writing should be long. Therefore, if students are to be able to write a cohesive academic essay, they need to start familiarising themselves with and practice academic writing according to the appropriate structure. Secondly, the difficulty in writing could stem from the students' low writing skills. It is understandable as writing is the most challenging skill to acquire in any language. Not only do students have to generate and organize ideas, they also need to translate the ideas into a comprehensible text (Pertiwi et al., 2018).

Another noteworthy cause of students' difficulty writing an academic essay could be their lack of exposure to academic writing due to minimal institutional support. Mukminin et al. (2015) in their study examining student teachers' experiences in academic writing found that one of the factors hindering the learning of academic writing was a lack of support from the



university. Participants in their study mentioned that while the institution required them to write papers or research reports, they were not well-facilitated. A similar condition might be true in the context of the current study. Students are often required to write essays, critical reviews, and articles but they do not have adequate support to improve their writing skills.

Intrinsic and extrinsic factors

Personal motivation is an intrinsic factor that greatly influenced student improvement in academic writing was their personal motivation. Motivation has been defined as “the process to make a start, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviour” (Gopalan et al., 2017). Personal motivation was seen as the fuel which keeps students focused on attaining their learning goals. Students who have personal motivation in learning will likely to maintain and achieve their learning goals.

The extrinsic factors included lecturer’s mastery of materials and lecturer’s feedback. These factors fall into the area of pedagogic competence, one that every lecture should have. Pedagogic competence can be broadly defined as “the ability to manage student learning” (Mahmud et al., 2019, p. 495). More specifically, pedagogic competence includes having sound knowledge of the course a lecturer is teaching, the ability to design and implement learning materials which encourages student participation, and the ability to evaluate student learning. Efendi (2021, p. 702) further adds five other aspects of pedagogic competence which includes:

1. mastery of students’ physical, social, cultural, emotional, and intellectual characteristics;
2. mastery of learning theory and principles of learning;
3. development of a subject-related curriculum;
4. educational learning;
5. facilitation of students’ potential to actualize.

Indeed, pedagogic competence has been found to significantly affect student learning and achievement (Astuty, 2015). When the lecturer has strong background knowledge of and experience in academic writing, she/he will be able to create a thorough design of the syllabus and classroom activities. In turn, it will automatically influence students’ understanding.

Another important aspect of pedagogic competence is the ability to assess student learning through the use of formative feedback. Feedback is one of the most important aspects of teaching and learning (Dixon & Hawe, 2016), and it is considered a powerful tool to improve student learning (Hattie & Clarke, 2019) though not all types of feedback can lead to learning improvement. Students in the current study seemed to highly appreciate the lecturer feedback. Students mentioned that feedback should be clear and easy to understand, which

are some of the criteria of effective feedback (Purwandari, 2021; William, 2016).

One of the functions of feedback is to minimize the gap between the current and expected understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 2010). Feedback that is clear might help student move forward with their learning as they have an improved understanding. Another significant aspect of the lecturer feedback from the perspective of students in the current study is that it is imperative that lecturer feedback is delivered in such a way that it would not put students into defensive or feel uncomfortable. This is in line with the findings from previous studies which suggest that the teacher or lecturer should consider student emotions when providing feedback as it

might affect their motivation (Mahfoodh, 2017; Ryan & Henderson, 2018). Feedback that encourages dialogue between the lecturer and the students will help students understand why their responses are correct or incorrect, and in turn, it will help students exercise their judgement of their own performance.

D. CONCLUSION

This study has exhibited that students' familiarity with types and structure of academic writing does not equal to their ability to develop logical paragraphs in their writing, in this case an essay. While writing an introduction part and the body paragraphs in an essay can be challenging, it can be mitigated through students' continuous effort in enhancing their understanding of the technicality in writing. This study has also shed lights on our understanding of the key factors that influence student improvement in learning academic writing: personal motivation and lecturer pedagogical competence. This study offers a practical implication for the lecturers, that is lecturers need to improve their pedagogical competence in academic writing in order to be able to accommodate student needs. As for students, they need to exercise their academic writing skills and try to avoid the traditional perspective of writing.

This study was descriptive in nature, which is why it has its limitation particularly in terms of the methodology used. Therefore, future studies might consider conducting a similar study with a different methodology such as qualitative case study so it will be able to capture an in-depth experience of the participants. Future research could also examine how institutional supports improve students' academic writing.

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