Exploring Students' Complexities in Writing Academic Essay

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Abstract

This study explored students' complexities in writing academic essay and the dominant complexities. This study used a mix-method approach. The documentary technique was used to collect the data in which students' essays were documented to be analyzed. The samples were 30 of fifth-semester students of English Education Study Program in Artha Wacana Christian University, Kupang. The results showed that students encountered the difficulties in four aspects of academic writing; 1) content; a) thesis statement; b) related ideas; c) development of ideas; and, use of the description/cause effect, comparison/contrast. All items in content showed 97%; 2) organization; a) introduction was 97%; b) logical sequence of ideas was 93%; c) conclusion was 90%; d) appropriate length was 40%; e) consistent focus was 93%; 3) discourse; a) topic sentence was 97%; b) paragraph unity was 67%; c) transition was 67%; d) discourse markers was 47%; cohesion was 47%; e) rhetorical convention was 87%; f) reference was 97%; and 4) mechanics; a) spelling was 6%; b) punctuation was 27%; and, citation of reference was 97%. The data showed that students made frequent errors in the four aspects; 1) 97% in all content items; 2) 97% in the introduction; 3) 97% in the topic sentence and 10% reference; 4) 97% in the citation of references. Therefore, academic writing is still complicated for the students of the English Education Study program. It is recommended that further research investigate the causal factors and find practical strategies to run academic writing courses.

Kata kunci:
Kata kunci 1
Kata kunci 2
Kata kunci 3
Kata kunci 4
Kata kunci 5

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kompleksitas mahasiswa dalam menulis academic essay dan kompleksitas yang dominan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan mix-method. Teknik dokumentasi digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Sampel penelitian ini adalah 30 mahasiswa semester V Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Kristen Artha Wacana, Kupang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan dalam empat aspek; 1) isi; a) tesis; b) gagasan terkait; c) pengembangan ide; dan, penggunaan deskripsi/sebab akibat, perbandingan/kontras. Semua item konten menunjukkan 97%; 2) organisasi; a) pendahuluan 97%; b) urutan ide yang logis 93%; c) kesimpulan 90%; d) panjang esai 40%; e) fokus konsisten 93%; 3) discourse; a) kalimat topik 97%; b) kesatuan paragraf 67%; c) transisi 67%; d) penanda wacana 47%; kohesi adalah 47%; e) konvensi retoris 87%; f) referensi 10%; dan 4) mekanik; a) ejaan 6%; b) tanda baca 27%; dan, kutipan referensi adalah 97%. Data menunjukkan bahwa siswa sering melakukan kesalahan pada keempat aspek tersebut; 1) 97% di semua item konten; 2) 97% dalam pendahuluan; 3) kalimat topik dan referensi 97%; 4) kutipan referensi 97%. Menulis essay masih rumit bagi mahasiswa program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris. Disarankan agar penelitian lebih lanjut menyelidiki faktor-faktor penyebab dan menemukan strategi praktis untuk mengjar mata kuliah academic writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is one of the courses offered at both university and school levels (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Bailey, 2015; Ariyanti, 2016; Mahmoudi, 2020) and is considered difficult by most students (Marpaung, 2017) because of the ability to produce language (Prihatmi, 2017). Academic writing is different from procedural, descriptive, or non-fiction writing such as novels, short stories called creative writing, and personal writing that are categorized into informal writing (Oshima & Hague, 2007; Bailey, 2011). Academic writing has rules such as writing with a formal, systematic structure and in a formal language and has logical organization (Bailey, 2015, 2017). Bailey (2011) added academic writing must be objective and accurate. Thus, students must at least have these ability in order to achieve standard writing. What makes academic writing is complex that students generally do not know such convention in writing causing students commit to plagiarism (Silfiani, Aziz & Daud, 2018; Subasman, 2020) which defined as "the practice of claiming credit for the words, ideas, and concepts of others" (APA in Razi 2015). Academic writing becomes challenging is not only due to a lack of grasp of academic writing conventions or a lack of writing habit but also due to the cognitive process as stated by Kasiri and Fazilatfar (2016), academic writing involves "a cognitive process". It demands mental processing and the ability to display suitable verbal repertoires. Bruce (2008) added that in order to generate an extensive written discourse that is both linguistically accuracy and socially suitable, academic writing demands the ability to combine a wide range of diverse sorts of information.

Numerous previous studies have shown students face numerous challenges in writing on those areas. Albadi (2015) found that students' difficulties in academic writing were in language use, coherency, cohesion, finding relevant topics and sources, referencing and citations. These problems occured because of not knowing academic writing conventio. Similar to Belkhir & Benyelles (2017), they found that students had difficulties in cohesion and coherence and first language transfer, and low writing practice. These difficulties also found by Toba, Noor, & Sanu (2019), Pablo & Lasaten (2018) also revealed that students lack various ideas, transitions used to build paragraphs and chose incorrect vocabulary, grammar, pronouns. It can be said that students almost have errors in all aspects of academic writing, as also found by Al-Mukdad (2019). Even postgraduate students face such difficulties. Imani and Habil (2012) said that grammaticality is one of the common challenges faced by NNS postgraduate students like what Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) found too. Arabic postgraduate students struggled mainly in language issues (Al-Zubaidi, 2012). Students can not differentiate the spoken and written language, create outline before making draft, and identify the skill required for good writing (Fadda, 2012). Thus, it can be inferred that students in various parts of the world at the school or university level both undergraduate and postgraduate students experienced difficulties in academic writing.

Students of the English Education study program, Artha Wacana Christian University, Kupang, also experienced difficulties writing academic essays. Only a few students were able to complete academic writing courses. Lecturers have conveyed things relating to academic writing and given writing exercises, but students still cannot execute their writing tasks well. It causes students to commit to plagiarism. However, plagiarism did not make their writing better, and of course, it will not be following the instructions given by the lecturer, and the things discussed are definitely out of topic. Therefore, this study aims to explore the complexities experienced by students of English Education study programs in writing academic essays. Previous researchers have already done this kind of research. However, previous studies mainly used qualitative methods and were limited to describing what aspects of writing the students found difficult so that the findings or research results were more of a description of difficult aspects. This study used a mixed-method. This study described what aspects students face viewed from how many samples have difficulty in the aspects and items in the aspects and what aspects are the most dominant as indicated by the number of total samples who experienced difficulty in each item.

It is necessary to explain scoring rubrics for writing to the students at the beginning of the course so that students are able to recognize the aspects of writing to be assessed by teachers. Most students fail because they do not familiar with the scoring rubric (Trinh, 2020). A scoring rubric is used as a tool for teacher to evaluate the performance of his or her students (Hima & Saputro, 2017). It has some benefits such as support for learning, skill development, having good thinking, etc (Andrade in Mahmoudi, 2020). Writing rubric might help them prepare their writing when they are

working on their task so that they can get good score in writing course. There are various forms of assessment in academic writing. In general, the assessment focuses on content, organization, and grammar and mechanics. It depents on which aspects that teachers want to assess. Brown in Brown (2003) proposed six aspects in assessing students writing; 1) content, 2) organization, 3) discourse, 4) syntax, 5) vocabulary, 6) mechanic. Brown's assessment was used in this research as the guide of exploring students complexities in academic writing. This research only focused on four aspects; the content, organization, discourse and the mechanic.

METHODS

This study used a mix-method. The students' essays, written in English, were analyzed to discover the complexities in writing an academic essay and the dominant complexities. Quantitative method was used to find out the percentage of students who made errors in writing academic essays. The population is 70 of fifth semester students (class A and B) of the English Education Study Program, Artha Wacana Christian University. However, for this research only 30 students from class B were taken as samples. The samples were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Compared with class A, it was found that 30 students from class B almost 1) wrote their essays off-topic and 2) made common errors in academic writing conventions. The documentation method was the most appropriate in this research because the data obtained was read, then recorded. The documents obtained were 30 student essays, then analyzed, compared and combined (synthesis), forming a systematic, coherent, and complete study result. The data instruments are the guideline of academic writing conventions and rubric for academic writing from James Dean Brown (1991). Brown was used as the guideline to see the correct form, organization, mechanics of academic writing. The rubric was used to see the indicators that students should achieve in writing academic essays.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The samples were 30 students from class B. Therefore, there were 30 essays taken as samples. The data had shown that the students have difficulty in all aspects of essay writing; the content, organization, discourse, and mechanics.

The students' complexities in writing academic essay

Twenty-nine students experienced difficulties in all aspects of content. Each aspect achieves 97 %. Students also made errors in organizing their writing. Twenty-nine (97%) students were difficult in writing an introduction, 28 students (93%) made errors in constructing their ideas logically, 27 (90%) made errors in the concluding paragraph. Only 12 (40%) students did not achieve the determined length of the essay (did not follow the instruction of the lecturer), and 28 (93%) students were out of focus. In the discourse part, 97% students were difficult in writing topic sentences, paragraph unity 67%, transitions 67%, discourse markers 67%, cohesion 47%, rhetorical convention 87%, and references 10%. In the mechanics, students were difficult in spelling 6%, punctuation 27%, citation of references 97% (see table 1).

Table 1. Students Complexity in Writing Academic Essay

No	Indicator	Total of students making errors	Percentage of error
	Content		
1	Thesis statement	29	97%
2	Related Ideas	29	97%
3	Development of ideas through personal experience, illustration, facts, opinion	29	97%
4	Use of description/cause effect, comparison/contrast	29	97%
	Organization		
1	Effectiveness of introduction	29	97%
2	Logical sequence of Ideas	29	97%
3	conclusion	27	90%
4	Appropriate length	12	40%
5	Consistent focus	29	97%

	Discourse		
1	Topic sentence	29	97%
2	Paragraph unity	20	67%
3	Transition	20	67%
4	Discourse markers	17	47%
5	Cohesion	17	47%
6	Rhetorical Convention	26	87%
7	Reference	3	10%
	Mechanic		
1	Spelling	2	6%
2	Punctuation	8	27%
3	Citation of references	29	97%

Sources: Brown's Rubric of Essay Writing

Table 2. The dominant complexities

No	Indicator	Total of students making errors	Percentage of error
	Content		
1	Thesis statement	29	97%
2	Related Ideas	29	97%
3	Development of ideas through personal experience, illustration, facts, opinion	29	97%
4	Use of description/cause effect, comparison/contrast	29	97%
	Organization		
1	Effectiveness of introduction	29	97%
2	Logical sequence of Ideas	29	97%
3	Consistent focus	29	97%
	Discourse		
1	Topic sentence	29	97%
	Mechanic		
1	Citation of references	29	97%

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to find out the complexities that students deal with in writing academic essays and to find out the dominant complexities occured in their essays. Therefore, this study investigated students' complexities in writing academic essays and the the dominant complexities they made in their essay writing. After analyzing the data using Brown's (1991) rubric of essay writing, it was found that students encountered difficulties in writing academic essays and made some errors in each aspect of content, organization, discourse and mechanics. Those errors are considered as the complexities that the students dealt with. This result has proven that students have not mastered the rules in academic writing so that they made errors in their writing. This section will start from the aspect of content to mechanics.

When writing an academic essay, students must make a claim and support it, as well as having a clear argument assembled with facts to make the content more trustworthy. It should be clear in the content of the essays written by the students (Booth, W.C., Colomb, G.G., & Williams, 2008; David, 2019). Brown's rubric mentioned that content consists of thesis statements, related ideas, developing ideas through personal experience, illustration, fact, and opinion, using the description cause/effect, comparison/contrast (Brown cited in Brown, 2001). Students found difficulties in all content items, and only one student out of 30 students can present good writing compared to 29 other students. Students may have problems with topic analysis, and if it happens, they can not make underlying questions the focus to be answered in their essays. Unable to formulate a question will cause a vague thesis statement. The thesis statement is the focus that must be supported by clear arguments (Rao, Chanock & Krishnan, 2007). In addition, it was found that students wrote off-topic. They did not understand the topic and could not make questions that lead to the thesis statement. Also, the argument was unclear. The essay looked messy in the content. A few students successfully analysed the topics; however, they were lost in the arguments and out of topics.

Aspects of the organization consist of 1) effectiveness of introduction, 2) logical sequence of ideas, 3) conclusion, appropriate length, and 4) consistent focus (Brown Cited in Brown 2001). Some jumpiness occurred in writing ideas. For example, *'studying using the internet is more effective than*

studying in the library. After this sentence, no explanation or reasons for studying with the internet are more effective than studying in the library. Otherwise, they wrote the comparison of the internet and library and got lost in their writing. Most students wrote their argumentation in the introductory paragraph so that they missed the thesis statement that should be stated in the introduction. 27 (90%) students did not include conclusions in their essays. They closed their writing in the contents without a concluding paragraph. Rao, Chanock & Krishnan (2007) illustrated the human body to describe the body of the writing. It consists of three parts; the head is the introduction, the body is the content, and the leg is the conclusion. Twelve students (40%) did not follow the instruction to write the essay with only 500-700 words. Of the 12 students, nine students wrote beyond 700 words and the rest under 400 words. The frequency of error occurred in the effectiveness of introduction, logical sequence of ideas, and consistent focus. Each of them was 97 %.

Turning to the discourse aspect, Brown (cited in Brown, 2001; Brown, 2015) proposed seven aspects: 1) topic sentence, 2) paragraphs unity, 3) transitions, 4) discourse markers, 5) cohesion, 6) rhetorical convention, and 7) reference. Students made errors in all aspects of the discourse. A *topic sentence* is a sentence that states the main idea of a paragraph. It was found that students did not have a topic sentence in their paragraphs. Perhaps, it happened because students 1) did not know what should be discussed in the essays. They failed to understand the topic of the essay and were unable to elaborate the basic knowledge about the topic; 2) did not provide a clear argument; 3) still did not know the topic sentence. Twenty-nine students made errors in this item. The problem with topic sentences was one of the frequent errors in discourse (97%). In terms of transition, students used only the most frequently occurring connectors (and, but, because) to link simple sentences in stating arguments. When writing academic essays, students are expected to use a range of linking words and cohesive devices to link the ideas. Most of the students were struggling to link ideas so that the ideas and information are organized adequately. Lea (1999) stated that constructing knowledge is the ability to process information or various knowledge. Students of higher universities are expected to have this ability. In fact, 29 (97%) students could not process the information in their writing, so that the jumpiness occurred in their essays. One student is good at constructing her idea using a range of linking words, and paragraphs are well-organized. Three students were confused with references. The term "reference" refers to the use of pronouns and other words to refer to something in the text (Al-Khalidy, 2018; Putri, Anwar & Ansoriyah, 2020) which classified as grammatical cohesion (Salkie cited in Al-Khalidy).

The last aspect is the mechanics (Brown, 2015). The mechanics consist of 1) spelling, 2) punctuation and 3) citation of references. It was found that only two students miswrote English words. One student wrote only one error in spelling. He wrote *'compre'* for *'compare*'. There were three errors in another student essay. She miswrote '*mi argumenttion*' for '*my argumentation'*. Only eight students made errors in punctuation. It seems that students still did not know the rules for correct punctuation. Besides grammar, spelling and punctuation also become the main issues in essay writing (Klimova, 2010; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017) . However, only a few students out of 30 students made the errors. The frequency of errors was also shown in the citation of the references. Twenty-nine students made the error in citing the references using APA style. Eight students had their in-text citations in the essay, but they cited them incorrectly, such as 1) mentioned the author's complete name “(Sigit Ariwibowo, 2009)”; 2) full name with complete and initial name “(Ariwibowo, S)”; 3) punctuation in the citation “(Ariwibowo: 2009)”. Otherwise, the 11 students had no citation in their text, but they had the references put in the list of references.

From 29 students who made errors in referencing using APA style, 18 students had some sources but referencing the sources incorrectly, and 11 students had no references in their essay.

The results have shown that the students made errors in writing academic essays, and students made errors in all aspects of essay writing starting from the content to the mechanics. Of the 30 students in one class, there was only one student who could write her essay correctly and follow the rules of academic writing, while there were still 29 students who were completely unable to write and did not achieve academic writing standards. It is a serious issue and must be addressed immediately; otherwise, it will impact students' final grades. They will not achieve a passing score of 60-100. The final score of the 29 students after accumulating in one semester was ranging from 30 to 57. In short,

they failed in academic writing (C, D and E), while the student who wrote well achieved 97.8 in her final grade. It is the responsibility of either teachers or lecturers who run the writing course to look back at the obstacles causing why students are still challenging academic writing. After figuring out the cause, it is necessary to find practical strategies to help students in writing so that the rules in academic writing can be easily understood by students, so that when they are given writing tasks, at least these problems can be minimized. Therefore, it is recommended that further research investigate the causal factors and find practical strategies to run academic writing courses.

CONCLUSION

This study has proved that academic writing is highly complicated. It was found that the content section was challenging. Of 30 students, 29 students could not write the content section well, such as determining thesis statements, connecting ideas and developing ideas, or using cause/effect and comparison/contrast. Students also still have difficulty with organization, especially writing an introduction, consistent focus, and logical sequence of ideas. In addition, students also have difficulty in determining the topic sentence and writing references and citations. Only one student can write her essay with a good standard of academic writing. For this reason, it is necessary to think about ways or strategies to teach academic writing so that students can quickly learn, understand the rules in academic writing, or first find out the factors that cause academic writing to be difficult for almost all students. It is also possible to create learning that focuses on students' self-evaluation of their own writing. It is not only the teacher or lecturer who evaluate their essay, but also students can evaluate their essays. Therefore, it is crucial for the teacher or lecturer who runs an academic writing course to determine the right strategy for learning academic writing. It is the recommendation for further research.

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GENERAL COMMENTS

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