

ROAD TO ACADEMIC WRITING

(A Case study of the 6th Semester Students Writing Research Projects)

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Abstract

The study investigates the students' understanding, practice, as well as experience in writing two small-scaled research-based papers during the Writing V course. It also examines how the course had assisted the students in preparing and writing their final research projects required for earning their bachelor degree in English Education Department. There were two classes participated in this study with 60 students. The results showed that the two mini research they had conducted in Writing V class have aided them in understanding the nature of research and improving the skills in administering the final research projects.

Background

In a lot of universities, the students are required to write a research paper as one of the requirements for their study completion. At Indonesia University of Education, after taking all the compulsory and elective subjects and teaching practicum or internship, the eighth or ninth semester students are required to submit their research proposals as they are reaching the end of their study at the university. However, based on my own experience and observations, the students need to be more prepared for this final task and sufficient and effective exposure and practice needs to be properly provided. The regular writing tasks which are usually loosely supervised should be taken more seriously. Constructive feedbacks on the students' work should also be given.

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Having those problems, it is not surprising that the students' ability to write a scholarly piece of writing is not yet satisfactory and needed to be improved. As they are approaching the end of their study at the university, many students have insufficient knowledge and experience in writing an academic paper. This could be made worse by inadequate skills in conducting research such as the ability to develop research instruments, selecting and gathering data, or the ability to analyze and interpret the results of the study. When the students have no idea of what research and research report is, the whole process of writing one only makes no or partial sense to them. With this circumstance, there is nothing much we can expect from them.

The Writing V course that I taught was especially designed to prepare the students to write academic, research-based writing. It combined the writing skills they have learned during the previous writing courses and the research knowledge they had from the Research in Education subject they had taken last semester. This whole semester would be dedicated for exercising the academic writing as the preparation for their final research reports.

It is in this spirit that this research is done. It is aimed at exposing the students with good models of research report from journals and two small-scaled research. At the end, it is directed at discovering how the lessons learned and how this experience served them when they have to carry out and write the final research report.

Academic Writing

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Writing undoubtedly involves particular difficulties related not only to the motor skills or problems of formal accuracy but also to the psychological matters due to lack of experience and practice (Harrison, 1986). Writing also should be considered as both the process and product with more emphasis given to the process in order to create good quality writing. In that, Sutton (1992) in Wright (2001) confirms that writing theory has been tending away from concentration on the product of writing and towards the view of writing as a process. This should make clear that preparing the students for their final research projects is crucial for the success of the writing the projects and their study.

The kind of writing the students need to acquire for finishing up their study is the academic writing. There are a lot of references provide information about academic writing, but they normally talk about the same idea that writing is a complex and recursive process and consists of several stages and activities. As in this paper, the type of academic writing relevant is the one leading to process of producing small-scaled research administered by student writers.

Since writing is not an spontaneous act (Irmscher, 1979), there are stages a writer should go through in the process of writing (see for example Kirszner and Mandell, 1997; Strauch, 1997; Law, 1987). The process usually starts with the preparation to write that involves setting the purpose of writing, knowing the target audience, selecting a topic, and exploring ideas that can be done in various ways, for example: reading, brain storming, interviewing, free writing, or perhaps discussing the topic with peers and teacher. The students must bear in mind, though, that the topic should be specific enough to ensure that they select a workable and manageable topic. After the topic is selected, the students need to decide on the research questions served as guidelines throughout the

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investigation. They too have to think about the research methodology as well as tools for data analysis.

Planning and organizing are the next stages. The students must use their time wisely since planning and organizing the research demand precision of time and discipline. Therefore, they should make the research schedule and try to stick on it. Soon, they can go the field to gain data. These data must be analyzed based on relevant theories and appropriate research design. This process takes quite a long time because there are a lot of things to consider and they have to be sure about them before they put it in their first draft.

In the next stage, writing the first draft, the students carefully examine the steps they have gone through to see if they are satisfied with what they have planned before. It is still possible to make major changes here (although changes can be made in all stages of writing). The students need to learn to make a distance with their writing in order to see their writing with different perspectives. They learn that a writer is also the first reader to the text.

Revising, which means improving the content and organization of the draft, is the next stage. This stage can be done once the first rough draft is made. So, as I mentioned earlier, self-evaluation is one way to revise the draft. The students can also use inputs from their peers for improvement. With the help from their peers, the students could see if their composition is clear and convincing. Before submitting the final draft, the students should proofread and edit the research paper. These could be done also during peer response activities. Of course, if they had problems, they could come and have conference with the teacher.

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In order to see the progress of the writing process, I gave the students the opportunity to revise and edit the draft twice. I also asked them to compile all of the drafts to evaluate their progress. Another purpose of this is to make them see how the process works.

With the intention to develop the students' sense of ownership toward their research, it is very crucial that I let them their own choices. Also, to ensure that they could find solution to their problem as soon as possible, as the teacher I made myself available most of the time. The deadline was negotiable because I believe, the students must be given enough room to perform the research at their own pace. Besides, each student might face different problems so they must be treated in the individual basis.

The research

The research begun in the even semester 2005/2006 academic year where I taught two classes of writing V, the last series of writing subjects. There were 60 students participated in this research and most of them are writing their research paper now.

For the first weeks, I lectured about stages and process of writing. For weekly assignment, the students should come to the classroom with a journal in hand, preferably the one that is closely related with their major or interests. From the first sessions the students had familiarized themselves with parts of the journals and write their comments about the research reported in them. Furthermore, the students were required to highlight the language used in the journals considering that they might need those expressions

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when they write their own research report. All together, they should compile no less than 15 journals throughout the semester.

After a few weeks, the students prepared their own research where they had to think about the topics, the research questions, methodology, instruments, samples, etc. During these sessions, the students discussed their ideas with peers and the lecturer. For most students, narrowing the topic was quite difficult since they had not yet the ability to estimate the depth and the width of their investigation.

The first topic for their first mini research related to the issues close to their personal lives. The data gathered also were made available by having their classmates as the source. The reason for this topic selection was, before investigating some complicated topics, it would be useful for the students to have some exercise on the topics they are familiar with. The purpose for this choice was to have the students exercise the steps and procedures of conducting research. The most important thing is that they got all the research procedures right. Some of the students' topic selections were, for example: students' interests, learning strategies, students' motivation, the effects of the students' childhood on their personalities, students' reading habits, and students' lifestyles.

The second research project's umbrella topics should relate to their major. This selection still provided the students with vast amount of workable topics. Some chose to research on the areas of English proficiency, English teaching learning process, students' perceptions, students' response, etc, while the other were interested in investigating students' mastery in various subjects.

When the entire semester was dedicated to work on each step of writing process (preparing to write, planning and organizing, writing the first draft, revising, proof

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reading and editing, and writing the final draft) with a lot of discussions and conferences, the students already grasped the feeling of what research was really about.

One year after the Writing V passed, I interviewed the students who were writing their final research projects for their degree. The purpose of this interview was to find out how the experience they had got during the Writing V subject had helped them in writing their research paper. They reported that the mini research they had done last year had provided them with some valuable experiences of conducting their own research. They reported that weighing the topic, setting the research questions and research methodology were some common problems they faced at the early stage of writing the research. With the experiences they had got, they did not have to wander too far. They confessed that they had better understanding the research report; what it should look like, the elements, the logic, as well as the language and expressions used in academic writing. The journals they had compiled consistently served as models for their research reports. They also felt how the supervision from the lecturers went smoothly with little obstacles which was beneficial for them in the process of conducting and reporting the research. One more aspect that was also important was that they also developed the sense of ownership to the research.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Writing is indeed a complex process. With this experience in teaching writing classes in the past few years has inspired me to do any possible efforts in improving the teaching learning quality and at the same time improving the students' skills in writing.

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Despite the hardship and overwhelming workload, I see a lot of space for creativity and improvement. The first-hand experience to conduct research, even small-scaled ones, has contributed to the students' knowledge and skills of developing one type of academic writing which is the form a research report.

From the students' point of view, it is only fair for them that they should be equipped with the skills and experience in conducting research before they do and write their final research report. Some other subjects probably serve the same purpose, but mostly what is demanded of the students is only writing a research proposal. I confirmedly believe that the students should go much further than that; they should go through the whole process, from the proposal to the research report.

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