

Exploring ESL Students' Current Competency and Needs in Academic Writing Skills at University

Meninjau Kompetensi Semasa Pelajar Universiti dan Keperluan terhadap Penulisan Akademik di Universiti

Nur Yasmin Khairani Zakaria¹, Amelia Abdullah², Siti Nazleen Abdul Rabu³

¹Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

²School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia²

³Centre for Instructional Technology & Multimedia, Universiti Sains Malaysia³

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*Corresponding author:

Nur Yasmin Khairani Zakaria

Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti
Kebangsaan Malaysia;

Email:

yasminzakaria@ukm.edu.my

Abstract: Mastering academic writing is one of the skills to be acquired by all university students. Ability to master academic writing skills enables university students to be more competent in presenting ideas and information related to their field. Inability to master required skills in academic writing will consequently impact the students' performance in fulfilling the graduation requirement. Generally, students in higher learning institutions (HLIs) are constantly struggling with unfamiliar styles and mechanisms in academic writing. The current situation subsequently resulted students' incompetency in presenting their ideas and discussion. In this study, the researchers aim to discover the students' expectation for an academic writing skills course and their current competency academic writing skills. An adapted questionnaire from Choo (1998) was used as the main instrument in this study to 65 undergraduate TESL students in public higher learning institution (HLI) in Malaysia. Analysis of data was done quantitatively using statistical software. Results from the analyses revealed that more than half of the respondents (76.9%) agreed that academic writing skills are regarded as complex skills to be acquired. In addition, the results also yielded that almost half of the respondents (46.2%) believed that literature review section is the most difficult section in an academic paper. Results from this study will be able to guide future researchers and educators in producing more teaching and learning related to academic writing mastery.

Kata kunci: English as a Second Language (ESL), academic writing, university students, research writing

Abstrak: Penguasaan penulisan akademik adalah salah satu kemahiran yang penting untuk dikuasai oleh semua pelajar universiti. Keupayaan menguasai kemahiran menulis akademik membolehkan pelajar universiti menyampaikan idea dan maklumat yang berkaitan dengan bidangnya dengan lebih baik. Ketidakupayaan untuk menguasai kemahiran yang diperlukan dalam penulisan akademik akan mempengaruhi prestasi pelajar dalam memenuhi syarat graduasi universiti. Umumnya, pelajar di institusi pengajian tinggi (IPT) menghadapi masalah dalam menguasai gaya dan mekanisme dalam penulisan akademik. Keadaan ini secara tidak langsung menyebabkan pelajar tidak dapat menyampaikan idea dan pandangan mereka dengan jelas. Dalam kajian ini, penyelidik meninjau keperluan dan tahap kompetensi semasa pelajar dalam kursus kemahiran penulisan akademik. Soal selidik yang diadaptasi daripada Choo (1998) digunakan sebagai instrumen utama dalam kajian ini kepada 65 pelajar sarjanamuda Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (TESL) di salah sebuah universiti awam (UA) di Malaysia. Analisis data dilakukan secara kuantitatif dengan menggunakan perisian statistik. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahawa lebih daripada sebahagian daripada

responden (76.9%) bersetuju bahawa kemahiran menulis akademik dianggap sebagai kemahiran kompleks untuk dikuasai. Di samping itu, hasil dapatan juga menunjukkan bahawa hampir separuh daripada responden (46.2%) percaya bahawa bahagian tinjauan literatur adalah bahagian yang paling sukar dalam penulisan akademik. Hasil daripada kajian ini dapat memberikan maklumat kepada penyelidik dan pengajar pada masa depan untuk menghasilkan lebih banyak bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran yang berkaitan dengan penguasaan kemahiran penulisan akademik.

Keywords: Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua (ESL), penulisan akademik, pelajar universiti, penulisan penyelidikan

Introduction

In Malaysia, English language learning started since preschool years whereby exposure of English as a second language becomes compulsory skills to be acquired by the students. Mastery of English language skills becomes more demanding as their level of competency increases. In the context of English as a second language, the four basic skills to be acquired by second language learners are listening, speaking, reading and writing skills (Kayimbaşioğlu, Oktekin, & Hacı, 2016). As these students enter tertiary level institution, mastery of English as a second language (L2) skills becomes more significant especially for future communication and career opportunities. The emergence of English as a medium of communication and instruction at tertiary levels resulted an increasing demand for second language enhancement. Comparing the four skills mentioned earlier, writing skills are regarded as the most difficult skills to be acquired by language learners (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Language learners' mastery of writing skills could reflect their proficiency of the language. Writing skills are the most complex skills to be acquired due to reiterating cycles of reasoning, structuring ideas and constructing sentences. Generally, academic writing skills involves the mastery of constructing thesis statements, presenting topic sentences and generating supporting details (Ansarimoghaddam, Tan, & Yong, 2017; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Due to these complexities, writing skills are perceived as the most daunting skills to be acquired and eventually hinder students' motivation to enhance their skills. In tertiary institutions, fulfillment of graduation requirement is one of the major concerns among students (Kennedy, 2015). Due to compulsory requirement from most universities, skills related to academic writing becomes even more demanding and important for the students to graduate. Inadequacy of knowledge and skills related to academic writing may adversely affect their

performance later in universities.

In the context of higher learning institution, academic writing skills include fundamental skills similar to formal writing particularly in terms of styles, structures and tone. According to Maznun (2017), students in higher learning institutions believed that the conventions in academic writing are generally complex in nature. Therefore, these students have been perceiving academic writing skills as difficult skills to be mastered. Incompetency in academic writing skills will bring about problems related to unethical acts in academia such as plagiarism and academic integrity. In tertiary levels, majority of ESL students are constantly having difficulties on acquiring academic writing skills (Ismail & Mohammad, 2017). It is precedent that academic writing skills are becoming one of the most important language skills to be acquired by students due to its importance envisaged by respective universities. Constant problems faced by students in academic writing skills will result adverse implications in the future. This is because, students in tertiary levels are in dire need to produce an academic writing (i.e theses, dissertation and final year project) for graduation. Therefore, inability to write effectively will adversely affect their ability to fulfill the graduation requirement.

Background of the Study

Generally, final year students in Malaysian universities are required to produce an academic piece of writing in various forms such as final year project, academic exercises, theses and dissertation (Azmuiddin, Nor, & Hamat, 2017; Othman & Nordin, 2013). Therefore, academic writing in universities is considered as one of the most important skills to be acquired by university students in the context of writing skills. The current study discovered a research gap in the previous studies on the insufficiency of learning resources for academic writing enhancement among university students. In

response to the aforementioned problem, the researchers in the current study aim to discover ESL students' needs and current competency in academic writing at tertiary levels. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. to discover ESL students current competency in terms of content-related knowledge in academic writing; and
2. to analyse ESL students' needs in an academic writing integrated with a game-based learning approach.

Methodology

The current study employed a survey research design using an adapted questionnaire by Choo (1990). After the adaptation of the questionnaire, validation by ESL experts was conducted. A pilot study was also conducted to analyse the reliability of the questionnaire that has involved a total of 30 students. In the actual study, a total of 65 ESL students participated through online survey distribution. The respondents are the undergraduate students of TESL programme in a public university in Malaysia. The ESL students are in their final year of study and have undergone the first part of research writing course in their penultimate year. Insights from the students are useful as it provides meaningful feedback from the students who have previously enrolled for a Research Methodology class. Collection of data was carried out using the adapted questionnaire mentioned earlier and the data were analysed quantitatively. Analysed data were presented using descriptive statistics using percentage values.

Result

Analyses of the study were presented according to the objectives of the study. The first objective is to discover the students' current competency in writing an academic paper and the second research objective aims to analyse ESL students' needs in an academic writing integrated with a game-based learning approach.

In the first part of questionnaire, the construct sought for ESL students' familiarity and general overview of academic writing. Items in the constructs consisted of their familiarity of an academic paper, overall difficulty of an academic paper and most complexity of academic writing perceived by ESL students. The item serves as a fundamental investigation for the researchers to assess students' general overview in terms of their familiarity with an

academic paper. Based on the feedback, the researchers in the current study discovered an insightful response from the students. In table 1, it is evident that majority of the students are familiar with a research paper. A total of 48 participants responded that they have written an academic piece of writing such as a research paper. Only a small number of participants were not familiar with a research paper and responded that they have not written any research paper with a total percentage of 26.2%. The overview of students' general familiarity with an academic writing could be regarded as highly familiar whereby 73.8% of the respondents stated that they have written a research paper.

Table 1: ESL Students' Familiarity with Academic Paper

Statement	Answer	
	Yes	No
1. Have you ever written a research paper?	48 (73.8%)	17 (26.2%)

Apart from their familiarity with an academic paper, the researchers also investigated the students' level of perceived difficulty related to academic paper writing. In Table 2, it is noted that majority of ESL students agreed that they were having difficulties in writing an academic paper. From the analysis, 50 of the respondents (76.9%) agreed to the abovementioned statement. In relation to the statement, it is also notable that only a small number of respondents (9.2%) mentioned that they were not having any difficulties when writing an academic paper. The rest of the respondents (13.8%) stated that they have not written any before. From the findings, it could be asserted that majority of ESL students were having difficulties when writing an academic paper despite of their familiarity with an academic paper.

Table 2: ESL Students' General Difficulty with regard to academic paper

Statement	Answer		
	Yes	No	I haven't written any before
1. Do you have any difficulties when you were writing an academic paper?	50 (76.9%)	6 (9.2%)	9 (13.8%)

In Table 3, the researchers sought for ESL students' general overview of difficulties that the ESL students faced in carrying out a research. From the findings, majority of the respondents agreed that "literature review search" is regarded as the most difficult part in conducting a research. A total of 30 respondents (46.2%) asserted that in carrying out a research, literature review is regarded as the most critical part for the. Overall, it is evident that the ESL students were having difficulties in almost all aspects including topic selection, literature review, research method design and analysis of the result. Therefore, it could be concluded that almost all aspects of research paper are regarded as "difficult" as the ESL students. It is noted that the respondents also agreed that other aspects of a research paper writing is generally difficult (Geri, Winer, & Zaks, 2017). A total of 11 respondents (16.9%) agreed that topic selection and research methodology design are difficult and 13 respondents (20%) agreed that analysis of results is also difficult.

Table 3: Difficulties to Conduct a Research

Statement	Answer				
	Topic selection	Literature review	Research method design	Analysis of results	Conclusion
Which section do you think is the most difficult section when carrying out a research?	11 (16.9%)	30 (46.2%)	11 (16.9%)	13 (20%)	-

Analysis of students' difficulty in writing a research paper in detailed is presented in Table 4. From the data presented, the researchers of the current study sought for their feedback on three main aspects of an academic writing which is reflected in the form of research paper sections. It aims to discover students' feedback of their current level of content-related knowledge including their competency in writing literature review, conducting a research and analyzing data from a research project. The participants' responses for these items were reflected in a 5-point Likert scale presented below.

Table 4: ESL Students' Difficulty in Research Paper Writing

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1 Do you know how to write a literature review?	9 (13.8%)	48 (73.9%)	8 (12.3%)	-	-
2 Do you know how to design a research project?	5 (7.7%)	41 (63.1%)	17 (26.2%)	2 (3.1%)	-
3 Do you know how to analyse data from a research project?	6 (9.2%)	49 (75.4%)	9 (13.8%)	-	-

Scale: 1 - Yes, I know it very well ; 2 - Yes, I know a little about it ; 3 - No, I don't really know ; 4 - No, I know nothing about it ; 5 - It doesn't matter to me

Previously, majority of the respondents asserted their unfamiliarity and low competency in managing and discussing literature reviews. In general, a total of 56 respondents evidently showed their low competency in literature review section. It is noted that 48 respondents (73.9%) agreed that they only know a little about literature review, and a total number of 8 respondents (12.3%) agreed that they have no idea in writing a literature review. From the analysis, only a small number of respondents (13.8%) have a high competency in writing a literature review. From the analysis, it is evident that majority of ESL students are having difficulties to write literature review effectively in a research paper or academic piece of writing. Difficulties in writing literature review may be due to the students' lack of competency and familiarity of the formats (Fadda, 2012; Yang, 2011).

Apart from students' difficulties in writing literature review, the researchers also discovered interesting findings on students' competency in designing a research project. From the data analysed, it is noted that a total of 60 participants (92.4%) have low competency in designing a research project. From the analysis, it is also interesting to assert that apart from difficulties in writing a literature review, ESL students are also constantly struggling in designing a research project. Designing a research project includes substantial information and meticulous reviews of past studies before selecting an appropriate design in a research. It could be concluded that students' competency in writing literature reviews is parallel to

their competency in designing a research project. Ineffective and limited review of literature resulted incompetency in designing a research project.

Findings from the study also revealed that ESL students were having difficulties in analyzing data from a research project. From the respondents' feedbacks, only a small number of respondents (9.2%) stated that they are competent enough to analyse data from a research project. Majority of the ESL students in this study stated that they are having difficulties in analyzing data from a research project. A total number of 49 respondents (75.4%) stated that they only have a limited or little knowledge about how to analyse data from a research project, and 9 respondents (13.8%) stated that they are unsure of data analysis in a research project.

The second objective discovered the students' expectation in an academic writing course in a game-based learning approach to improve their writing skills. In this section, three main aspects of students expectations in a game-based learning classroom were discovered namely: 1) expectation on types of activities, expectation on types of feedbacks and expectation on supplementary materials.

Table 5 presented respondents' statements that reflected the highest students' agreement in the questionnaire. In terms of the students' expectation on the preferred types of activities, the researchers discovered that majority of the respondents agreed that they will be more interested to learn when the instructor use games as a part of the activities in class. In the second statement, more than half of the respondents (56.6%) agreed that the use of Kahoot in classroom is more interesting. It is also supported by the third statement whereby half of the respondent (50%) agreed that they feel for more motivated to learn when games are integrated in classroom. In could be asserted that the students are expected instructor to integrate more games in classroom learning as it could spark their interest and motivation to learn in class.

Table 5: Expectation on types of activities

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1 I prefer the instructor to use more games while teaching	39 (65%)	8 (13.3%)	6 (10%)	7 (11.7%)	-
2 I find it more interesting when the instructor use games like "Kahoot" in class	34 (56.6%)	10 (16.7%)	9 (15%)	7 (11.7%)	-

3 I feel more motivated to learn when the instructor use games in classroom	30 (50%)	14 (23.3%)	10 (16.7%)	6 (10%)	-
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Scale: 1 – Strongly Agree ; 2 - Agree ; 3 - Unsure ; 4 - Disagree ; 5 – Strongly

In Table 6, an analysis of students' expectation in terms of types of feedbacks is presented. In this section, the researchers aimed to discover what type of feedback does the students prefer.

In general, it could be suggested that most of the respondents in the current study prefer immediate feedback from instructor. A total of 59 respondent (98.3%) agreed that fast and immediate feedback in online games helps them to understand the topic better. Apart from instant feedback obtained from online games, the respondents also agreed that immediate feedback from instructor is helpful in understanding the topic better. Instant feedback and immediate answer obtained from online games and instructors' assistance is also useful to help students remember important keywords in certain topic. In the third statement, more than half of the respondents (53.3%) agreed that they will be able to memorise important keywords upon immediate feedback obtained from an online game website.

Table 6: Expectation on types of feedbacks

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1 I understand more when I get instant answer while playing games	29 (48.3%)	30 (50%)	-	1 (1.7%)	-
2 I find it more helpful when the instructor gives me immediate answer while playing games	40 (66.7%)	15 (25%)	5 (8.3%)	-	-
3 I will be able to remember important keywords when correct answer shown immediately	32 (53.3%)	20 (33.3%)	8 (13.3%)	-	-

in online
game
website.

Scale: 1 – Strongly Agree ; 2 - Agree ; 3 - Unsure ; 4 - Disagree ; 5 – Strongly

The last aspect discovered by the researchers is the students’ expectation on supplementary materials. In this section, the researchers aimed to discover what type of material does the students prefer. In general, it could be suggested that most of the respondents in the current study prefer the instructor to provide materials in an online game platform. The respondents agreed that they feel motivated to answer questions in online games platform. A total of 33 respondents (55%) agreed that they feel motivated to do exercise in online platform such as Kahoot and Quizziz. Apart from that, the respondents also mentioned that they feel less stressful when answering questions while playing games. This may be due to the nature of games which is fun and motivating in manner.

Table 7: Expectation on supplementary materials

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1 I feel more motivated to do exercise in online platform (such as Quizziz, Kahoot)	33 (55%)	19 (31.6%)	4 (6.7%)	4 (6.7%)	-
2 I feel less stressful when answering questions while playing games.	2 (36.7%)	9 (31.6%)	0 (16.7%)	1 (15%)	9
3 I find it interesting to answer questions in online games platform	41 (68.3%)	10 (16.7%)	7 (11.7%)	2 (3.3%)	-

Scale: 1 – Strongly Agree ; 2 - Agree ; 3 - Unsure ; 4 - Disagree ; 5 – Strongly

Conclusion

The main objective is to analyse students’ current needs in an academic writing course to further enhance their academic writing skills. The current study investigates the students’ current competency of academic writing and discovers their future needs in academic writing to fulfil their demands of writing for graduation and publication. Data from this study revealed that “Literature Review” is regarded as the most difficult aspects to be mastered by the students. This current

response received may be due to the need for extensive reading to produce high quality literature reviews. Data from this study is useful for future researcher and content developer for academic writing course to scrutinise the current materials and content of academic writing course. It is important for the content developer to analyse the students’ needs to make sure that the students are able to learn effectively in an ESL classroom. The current study also shed a new light for the researchers to provide useful materials for the students to further enhance their academic writing in the future.

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