# EXPLORING AN ACADEMIC WRITING CLASS IN AN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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#### **Abstract**

Academic writing class in any Indonesian university context plays an important role for the students to cope with written academic assignments. This paper explores the perceptions of university students regarding their academic writing class. The participants were students of a private university in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. They were selected based on their achievements in the class and their genders. The data collection made use of interviews which were conducted immediately after the completion of the class. Individual interviews were conducted with six participants with three of them were male and the other three were female who were mainly regarded as medium achievers. The interview sessions were audio taped. The data then transcribed and analysed thematically. The discussion of the findings showed that the students gained benefits from the class through the applications of genrebased approach teaching stages, explicit teaching, and group work, which enabled the lecturer to develop the students' academic writing, critical thinking, and characters. Still, several limitations were also identified. Suggestions were offered by the participants for the betterment of the academic writing class.

**Keywords**: academic writing class, genre-based approach, students' perceptions, language teaching, critical thinking

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#### INTRODUCTION

Writing is not a product that can be produced naturally. It is achieved through thinking, drafting, and revising procedures that require specialised skills (Brown, 2000). In relation to Indonesian university context, there are specialised skills that the university students have to learn to enable them to think and write academically. To mention a few, the skills are finding ideas and using academic linguistic features. Unfortunately, these two skills are not easy to learn. Indonesian university students are regarded as weak

where they have difficulties to write academically due to those limitations (Hardono, 2016; Harjanto, 2014; Nugraha, 2015).

Accordingly, an ideal academic writing class is expected. To do so, this paper explores an academic writing class in an Indonesian university context. The class applied genre-based approach developed under systemic functional linguistics as a good deal of previous research have shown that the teaching approach is effective to develop English as foreign language

university students' academic writing and critical thinking skills (Emilia, 2005; Emilia & Hamied, 2015; Payaprom, 2012).

This paper will begin from a delineation of the academic writing competencies that should be covered by an ideal academic writing class. An ideal academic writing class should address every aspect of academic writing including good critical thinking and good characters that guide them in the academic writing activities. To begin with, the students should have a good mastery of the academic writing genre with its linguistic features. Argumentative writing is a common genre that can show the students' critical thinking capacity that is learned in the university (Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Nesi & Gardner, 2006). It has two main genres that have different purposes. The genres are exposition and discussion that have analytical and hortatory functions (Coffin, 2004; Hyland, 1990). Several linguistic features or academic languages of the genres are generalised participants, timeless present tense, and passive voice (Derewianka, 1990, pp. 76–78).

Besides the genre and its linguistic features, the university students should also have intellectual standards that guide them in applying critical thinking in their writing. The intellectual standards are clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logicalness, and fairness (Elder & Paul, 2013). When the genres of academic writing realise the quality of the students' writing at the text level, these intellectual standards mainly realise the quality of the students' critical thinking at the sentence level.

The academic writing genre, linguistic features, and intellectual standards are probably sufficient to be learned by the university students at the beginning level. However, academic writing is a complex skill.

There are more to teach to the students to ensure they really ready to cope with many complex academic assignments waiting for them. Fallacies in reasoning and ethics of academic writing are two more features that should be learned by the students. Fallacies in reasoning is a failure in doing a reasoning such as generalising a particular issue as a common one with a little evidence or attacking a credibility of a person instead of the argument the person has (Kurfiss, 1997). Then, the ethics of academic writing will guide the students to respect and care every reference to contribute to their writing (Jones, 2011). This can be a form of character building in the university setting.

At this point, an ideal academic writing class should cover not only the academic writing genre and its linguistic features but also should cover the aspects of good critical thinking and good characters that guide the students in the academic writing activities. The following section will discuss the methodology of this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This descriptive study aims to explore an academic writing class in an Indonesian university context. The class applied the systemic functional genre-based approach teaching stages. The teaching stages are building knowledge of field, modelling, joint construction, and independent construction stages (Emilia, 2012), which were conducted in two teaching cycles for nineteen meetings in one semester with each meeting spent ninety minutes. Two introductory sessions to critical thinking—learning the intellectual standards and fallacies in reasoning and characters—learning to work together and the ethics of academic writing were conducted before the class. Besides the teaching stages, the researcher who acted as the lecturer

incorporated explicit teaching and group work as important principles of the teaching approach (Emilia, 2005; Hyland, 2007).

The study was conducted in an academic writing class. The participants were English Education department students of a private university in Pontianak. They were thirty-six students who attended the class. Out of thirtysix students, there are only six students who were selected to participate in this study. The selection of the students was based on their achievements in the class and their genders (Norum, 2008). In the data collection, the researcher made use of interviews, which were conducted after the completion of the class. The interviews were conducted in individual (Barlow, 2010; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011). Individual interviews were conducted with six participants with three of them were male and the other three were female who were mainly regarded as medium achievers. The interview sessions were recorded by using a digital sound recorder and then the records were transcribed verbatim as interview transcripts to be analysed qualitatively (Creswell, 2012).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis is more typical of the use of the inductive approach to coding (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011) where themes emerge from textual data (Lancia, 2012). The goal of the thematic analysis by using the inductive approach is "to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238).

The procedures of the thematic analysis began from (1) storing and transcribing the

data; (2) coding process by exploring the data; (3) using the codes to develop a more general picture of the data; (4) representing the findings through narratives and visuals; and (5) making an interpretation of the meaning of the results by reflecting personally on the impact of the findings and on the literature (adapted from Creswell, 2012, p. 237). The data analysis was applied throughout and after the fieldwork with its iterative and flexible process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008). Completed the data analysis, the following section will discuss the findings of this study.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section delineates the students' responses regarding their experiences after attending an academic writing class for a semester in an Indonesian university context. The discussion of the findings, later on, shows that the students gained benefits from the class through the applications of the systemic functional linguistics genre-based approach teaching stages, explicit teaching, and group work, which enabled the researcher as the lecturer to develop the students' academic writing, critical thinking, and characters. Still, several limitations were also identified. The findings support earlier research that the genre-based approach can develop academic writing and critical students' thinking (Emilia, 2005; Emilia & Hamied, 2015). The teaching approach also can develop the characters of the students at the tertiary level (see Hardini, 2013 for an earlier research conducted to the secondary level students). Yet, this paper comes with a limitation where this paper only delineates partial findings of the students' responses from the interview sessions only. Meanwhile, the students' academic writing products that can strengthen the value of this paper are

elaborated elsewhere. Another limitation of this paper is that the study was conducted to a specific university in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, Indonesia which has its own characteristics. That means different contexts may result in different findings.

The students' responses in the individual interviews focus on two domains. They are: (1) the students' perceptions of the class based on three aspects (academic writing, critical thinking, and characters); and (2) the students' suggestions for the betterment of the class. Nineteen items of interview questions realised the focus of the interview. The interviews were conducted immediately after the class with six selected students. They were Desi, Heri, Aan, Sari, Elias, and Ani (their names are in pseudonym).

# The Students' Perceptions of the Class

The students' perceptions of the class, in general, are good. Elias pointed out that the class was beneficial for him, especially for writing his thesis later on. Elias also mentioned that the class helped him in the transition of informal writing like narrative to scientific writing that uses different linguistic features. This indicates that the students realised the importance of academic writing for their studies.

Then, the interview moved to more specific questions. In relation to academic writing, the students commented that academic writing was important to them as they required it to complete their studies. The same thing goes to critical thinking. The students' knowledge of critical thinking was developed as they managed to provide a better definition of critical thinking. For instance, Ani's comment is as follows:

Menurut saya berpikir kritis ee setelah saya mengikuti pengajaran ini berpikir kritis adalah ee bagaimana cara kita emmm mengeluarkan argument kita dan mengelaborasikannya dengan pendapat para ilmuan atau para expert yang telah ada.

In my opinion, critical thinking, after I followed this teaching program, is how we point out our arguments and elaborate them by adding experts' opinions.

Ani explained that, after the class, there was a development as they have familiar with the process and competencies of academic writing and critical thinking. As the students' knowledge of academic writing, critical thinking, and characters developed, they realised the importance of these aspects. Certainly, this was made possible by the genre-based approach teaching principles where the students not only learned a language and about a language but also the students learned through a language, in this case, critical thinking and characters (see Halliday, 1993).

Still, the students also commented that academic writing and critical thinking were not easy to learn. For instance, Elias comment is as follows:

Yang pertama, cukup sulit karena saya harus bertransisi mengubah cara berpola ... pola pikir saya pertama, terus kemudian mencocokkan life experience saya dengan e.. pendapat ilmiah yang akan saya tulis dalam karya ilmiah tersebut, kemudian e saya dapat voca vocabulary baru yang awalnya yang saya tau itu di dalam karya ilmiah itu ternyata tidak tidak boleh menggunakan contraction, seperti can't jadi cannot.

It was difficult for me for the first time as I have to change my thinking pattern, then match my life experience with the

scientific reason and the rules in academic writing where I cannot use contractions such as can't to cannot.

The comment indicates that the student was aware of the process and competencies of academic writing and they have to learn it to be successful students especially if they want to complete their studies. Then, the participant also commented out that he experienced difficulties to implement the knowledge into practice especially when the students were new to academic writing and critical thinking. As a result, the explicit teaching was applied by the researcher as the lecturer to help the students to practice their knowledge until they were ready to perform by themselves (see Emilia, 2012; Swartz & McGuinness, 2014).

One important aspect that plays important role in academic writing and critical thinking is characters. The students regarded characters as important for them. For instance, Sarah's comment is as follows:

Iya karakter ini sangat penting dalam penulisan ilmiah karena dengan itu kita bisa eee banyak belajar seperti kita bertanggung jawab seperti dengan kejujuran dan keadilan

Yes, characters are important in academic writing as it can help us to learn responsible, honest, and fair.

The students learned characters such as responsibilities, honesty, and fairness, which are very important in guiding them in academic writing and critical thinking practices. Then, based on their interview transcripts, the students have learned characters from the texts they have read and teaching and learning activities during the teaching program. For instances, Ani's and

Toto's comments respectively are as follows:

Ee dalam pengajaran dalam program pengajaran ini karakter yang saya dapatkan adalah selalu untuk peduli sesama em jujur em em dan ehm menolong sesama tanpa pamrih. (Ani) In teaching program I learned characters such as care each other, honesty, and help each other. (Ani)

Karakter yang saya pelajari, itu tentang dari masalahnya online-learning itu dapat kita saya saya mengambil dari yang e negatifnya sss karena menurut saya, dari negatif online-learning itu banyak banyak sekali yang bisa diambil. (Aan)

Characters that I learned from the online learning issue were the negative.

The characters here are not only the good one but also negative things that they regarded as bad characters. For instance, Aan's comment is as follows.

Karakter yang saya pelajari banyak dari yang negative dan positif tentu ada juga yang ee biasa seperti eee hanya membaca dan tanpa memberikan Feedback atau masukan-masukan yang yang berguna.

Characters that I learned some were negative and some were positive. The negative was reading without giving feedback or giving useless feedback.

Knowing bad characters does not mean that the students practise bad characters. Instead, it helped the students to understand themselves and their friends. Their capabilities in deciding good and bad things were monitored and guided by the lecturer to make sure they will practice the good

characters instead of the bad characters. Besides, character building proponents surely do not allow a lecturer to model a bad character (Lickona et al., 2007).

The students pointed out that the class developed their skills of academic writing and critical thinking as the class provided them with the procedures of academic writing and critical thinking followed by the dispositions or characters in academic writing and critical thinking. Furthermore, the students claimed that their masteries of the academic writing genre and its linguistic features including the grammar were improved. For instances, Sarah's and Heri's comments respectively are as follows.

Eee untuk itu saya sebelumnya belajar sama bapak itu emm bagaimana menulis yang baik spell ya spelling yang baik itu yang banyak kata-kata seperti eee menghubungkan seperti modality seperti nomalisation. (Sarah)

Learning with the lecturer was about how to write a good writing by using proper spelling, modality, and nominalisation. (Sarah)

Sebelumnya Bapak selalu memberikan revisi kepada kami, dimana e di dalam tulisan karya ilmiah kami tersebut, dimana ada kesalahan Bapak selalu memberikan revisi, sehingga kami jadi lebih paham tentang apa yang Bapak sampaikan dan di dalam hal tersebut, kami bisa e.. membuat karya ilmiah kami lebih baik lagi dari segi bahasa dan sebagainya. (Heri)

The lecturer always revises our work where in our academic writing the lecturer pointed out a revision so we can understand what the lecturer's demand and that is to write a good academic writing from its language use etc. (Heri)

These comments show that the students' masteries were developed after the class. Still, the students also admitted that they have limitations in academic writing, critical thinking, and character practices. For instances, Delima's and Ani's comments respectively are as follows.

Ee saya sulit untuk menggabungkan antara e menyatukan e dari sumber dengan pendapat saya. Dari sumber misalnya dari ee dari expert-expert gitu kan, abis itu saya mau gabungkan dengan pendapat saya sendiri itu sulit bagi saya. (Desi)

It is difficult to combine a reference with my own opinion. A reference is like an expert's statement then I have to combine it with my own opinion. (Desi)

Em kesulitannya adalah ketika kita ingin ee menulis terkadang kita melakukan kesalahan seperti plagiarism yaitu kita mengambil ee mengambil pendapat para expert dan mengatakan bahwa itu adalah pendapat kita dan itu adalah sifat tidak jujur dan menjadikan karakter yang baik itu susah diimplementasikan dalam berpikir kritis dan menulis ilmiah ini. (Ani)

The difficulty is when we want to write but we sometimes do mistakes like plagiarism; when we take an expert's statement and claim that as our own; that is being dishonest and makes good characters difficult to be implemented in critical thinking and academic writing. (Ani)

Several limitations faced by the students

were about writing a citation to support their arguments and plagiarism. The students' limitations in academic writing, critical thinking, and character practices were something that could not be faced by the students on their own. The researcher as the lecturer employed explicit teaching and group work to develop their academic writing, thinking, and characters. certainly also including providing sufficient guidance to the students to deal with issues in academic writing, critical thinking, and characters. The descriptions of the explicit teaching and group work were provided by Aan and Heri as follows:

Dosen banyak memberikan feedback untuk karya suatu untuk e karya ilmiah yang saya kirim dan setelah direvisi ulang, kembali dikirim diberikan feedback dan diberikan masukan bagaimana cara untuk berpikir kritis yang lebih baik. (Aan)

The lecturer provided feedbacks to my academic writing and after the revisions, I have to submit it again to be given another feedback in relation to academic writing and critical thinking. (Aan)

Bapak e selalu membuat kami sebelumnya berkelompok, jadi beliau selalu membuat kami itu bekerjasama, saling membentuk ee karakter yang baik di dalam mengerjakan hal tersebut. (Heri)

The lecturer asked us to work in group to build good characters. (Heri)

The descriptions show that the main activity of the explicit teaching was giving feedback to the students' writing. The feedbacks were related to academic writing with its ethics and critical thinking. Then, the students were instructed to work in group to

help them to build good characters (see Lickona, 1999a). Besides explicit teaching and group work, other strategies were also applied as pointed by Aan.

Baik, karena di samping mengajar, dosen juga memberikan masukan-masukan yang dapat dimengerti, e mudah dimengerti. Good, besides teaching, the lecturer provided understandable feedback.

Aan's comment shows that the researcher acted as the lecturer provided understandable feedback. At this point, the students' comments mainly show that the class was beneficial to them. The application of the genre-based approach teaching stages, explicit teaching, and group work allowed the researcher to develop the students' academic writing, critical thinking, and characters. Even though, several limitations were also identified. The next section will delineate the suggestions of the students for the betterment of the class.

# The Students' Suggestions for the betterment of the Class

There is one important point of the students' suggestions. The point is about the teaching strategies. In the earlier section, the researcher mentioned several strategies applied in the teaching program. They were explicit teaching—provide explicit guidance; and group work—provide a better learning with peers in a large class (see Shamim, Negash, Chuku, & Demewoz, 2007). These strategies were necessary to help them to achieve the purpose of the class. Still, several aspects should be paid attention by the researcher. This is commented by Ani and Heri respectively.

Ee saran untuk program pengajaran ini adalah mungkin untuk tidak lebih monoton dan mencari variasi ee cara belajar yang lebih tidak menegangkan atau ya tidak membosankan seperti itu, ee yah mungkin itu saja. (Ani)

Suggestions for the teaching program are making the teaching not monotonous and having more variations in teaching to make the teaching not stressful or boring. (Ani)

Mungkin ke depannya, revisi harus dilakukan sebaik mungkin dan mahasiswa lebih diajarkan lagi bagaimana cara membuat revisi yang baik, selama ini kami masih kurang mengerti bagaimana membuat revisi yang baik, bagaimana membuat e karya ilmiah dengan baik. Jadi diharapkan kedepannya Bapak bisa lebih bagus dalam apa menyampaikannya lebih jelas dan lebih memberikan pemahaman pada setiap mahasiswa yang belajar disana. (Heri)

In the future, the revision should be done properly and the students should be provided with more inputs in learning how to do a good revision as we were not really understand how to do one. It is expected that the lecturer can be better in presenting the materials and giving understanding to the students. (Heri)

In the earlier section, the students claimed that the teaching program developed their knowledge, skills, and characters in academic writing and critical thinking. However, during the class, the students who dealt with the same activity over and over again without variations created a stressful and boring class atmosphere. The researcher as the lecturer should be able to provide interesting teaching and learning activities that can engage the

students in learning academic writing even though the reality is academic writing practice can be a stressful activity for anyone (see Mukminin, Ali, & Ashari, 2015). Another point is the lecturer should be able to equip the students with everything they need to do a good revision.

Then, in the earlier section, the students admitted that they have difficulties in academic writing such as writing a citation and plagiarism act. The reasons can be many. This is commented by Elias.

Aa menurut saya sarannya adalah e bagi dosen bagi dosen bagi dosen untuk dosennya kak, untuk pengajarnya. Kalo menurut saya, metode yang digunakan sudah baik, yang yang menjadi masalah ini adalah e kepa mahasiswa itu paham atau tidak akan apa yang akan e apa yang akan kita pelajari di dalam penga e proses pla pembelajaran itu sendiri seperti, menurut saya, menurut.. menurut saya, masih ada teman-teman yang bingung mengguna e akan akan apa sih.. apa sih yang akan mereka lakukan didalam mata kuliah ini. Yang pertama itu, e mereka masih menggunakan google translate untuk untuk e membuat terjemahan dari bahasa Indonesia ke bahasa Inggris supaya le mempermudah mereka. Nah kalo menurut saran saya, e dosen lebih harus menekankan untuk tidak menggunakan Google translate kemudian menggunakan lebih grammar berdasarkan kemampuan mereka dan juga e menekankan e setiap aspek yang linguistik itu tadi, seperti karakter kemudian critical thinking, itu saja.

My suggestion is, for the lecturer in the teaching has already used proper methods. The problem was the students whether they understood or not regarding the topic

under discussion. In the learning process, In my opinion, some friends were still confused about what to do in the academic writing class. First, they still like to use Google translate to translate from the Indonesian language to the English language to ease them. In my opinion, the lecturer should emphasise not to use Google translate, instead, they should use proper grammar that they know and emphasise the linguistic features required, character, and critical thinking.

The reason of the issue was some students used Google translate to accommodate them in translating from the Indonesian language to the English language. Elias suggests that the lecturer should tell the students not to use Google translate. This sounds reasonable and shows that the students were still thinking in the Indonesian language instead of thinking in the English language that created a gap when they translated their ideas using Google translate into the English language as the software apparently cannot see the context of the ideas or writing (see Sheppard, 2011).

The main point of the suggestions is the lecturer. The lecturer should be able to provide good teaching strategies. The strategies are not just about addressing their needs in academic writing, critical thinking, and characters but also how to deal with the

learning process throughout the class. Addressing this issue, hopefully, could create a good learning atmosphere in the classroom.

### **CONCLUSION**

The individual interview responses reveal that the class was beneficial for the interviewees. It helped them to develop their knowledge, skills, and characters in academic writing and critical thinking. In relation to character building, the interviewees claimed to grasp characters such as responsibilities, honesty, and fairness that guided them in the academic writing practice. However, the academic writing practice was not easy for them. The interviewees claimed still have difficulties such as to apply the ethics of academic writing to support their arguments.

To sum up, the individual interview data managed to show that an ideal academic writing class should incorporate the systemic functional genre-based approach teaching approach along with the explicit teaching and group work to handle a large class. It is also important to arouse the students' interests in the academic writing class. A further study could explore the postgraduate students' academic writing class to see how the teaching approach can develop the students' academic writing, critical thinking, and characters.

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