

# WRITING ACADEMICALLY: EXPERIENCES OF INDONESIAN GRADUATE STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD

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## ABSTRACT


It requires particular approaches to produce a qualified academic writing since it is a basis of understanding, representing the quality of the writer's thinking and potential ideas. This study was conducted to investigate the experiences of two Indonesian students taking a Master's degree at the University of Adelaide, in constructing academic writing. Interview, to give an ethnographic perspective, was used in this study and the participants were asked with seven open-ended questions. The findings showed that, the students identified second language difficulties with regard to writing in general (grammatical and orthographic category), and difficulties with understanding the readings, and translating that into critical analysis to support argumentation. English as a foreign language (EFL) educational background was another issue to appear during the interview in relation to their obscurities in constructing the writing academically. Peer review, furthermore, also played a significant role to help them produce a better writing through proofreading.

KEYWORDS: *Academic Writing, Graduate Students. Students' Experiences.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing must adhere to some common standards and expectations, such as the university rules and conventions for behavior, since it is one of the ways that higher education students communicate. This makes it clear what is expected of academic writing (Shields, 2010, p. 6). Since it requires a specific approach to provide the readers with a consistent understanding, it might be challenging to depict these features in academic writing. If it occurs in the first language, on the other hand, the circumstance will be different. This foundation served as motivation for the creation of this study, whose primary goal is to pinpoint the challenges faced by students when producing academic writing. Considering academic writing to be a challenging literacy task, participants are asked to join this study as they experience the similar case to the study



addressed. Another considerable reason to collaborate with the participants is that about their field of study; Education. It is a remarkable experience to be able to develop knowledge of linguist area and being applied into other disciplinary studies. Consequently, it is expected that the participants obtain beneficial impact of this project on their further studies.

The respondents, who have experience with English as a second language, unquestionably encounter some challenges while writing, particularly academic writing. Gilmore (2009) said that "writing may be a difficult, painful process even in our mother tongue, but when it is in a second language the issues (and the anguish) are compounded." This is relevant to what she said (p. 363). Additionally, several components that indicate the significance of academic writing are needed. "Writing is an involvement in a social process, where the production of texts reflects methodology, arguments, and rhetorical strategies constructed to engage colleagues and persuade them of the assertions that are presented," according to Hyland (1999, p. 100). In terms of the method used to enhance writing, White and McGovern (1994, p.1) stated that "your writing will benefit when you become a good critic – a critic of both your own writing and that of other people".

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *ACADEMIC WRITING*


Writing, a component of literacy, calls for specific strategies and abilities to generate qualified writing, notably in academic literature. When this situation occurs at a higher educational level, such as in a university setting, where writing is used to both stimulate learning and serve as a basis for self-assessment with the goal of developing students' potential and awarding degrees that reflect how far that potential has been realized, the situation becomes more demanding (Jones, 1999; Shields, 2010). Following high school, enrolling in a university program suggests that new ways of thinking have begun. New techniques for comprehending, interpreting, and organizing knowledge were among them (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 157). Lea and Street concur that there are numerous dependent variables. Similarly, Hyland (2006, p. 22) states academic literacy as the ways to use language which are patterned by social institutions and power relationship. This obviously construes that the ability to create an academic writing is not only limited by the aspects explained above, but also encompassed the social meaning of the surrounding.

However, Winch and Wells (1995) argue that literacy is not necessary to be taught to students by describing three arguments to support their findings: first, the attempt of educators to motivate students' self-expression and creativity rather than into concern

with secretarial accuracy; less concern with the accuracy of spelling since the intended meaning of writing can be understood easily; the development of electronic media may replace the literacy skills; and third, the lack of need for literacy instruction in the classroom. Since students need to demonstrate their mastery of all secretarial knowledge, including spelling, punctuation, and other literacy skills, this is a critical worry for lecturers that need to be prioritized. Henderson and Moran (2010) consequently emphasize that regardless the circumstance, good writing is rationally arranging thoughts, using careful word choices, and creating texts that make sense to the readers.

As a novice in terms of second language writing, the typical features of writing in a foreign language, specifically in a higher education context, should be revealed by the writers (Hyland, 2004). In further explanation, Hyland describes that in presenting the informational content, writer must also adopt interactional and evaluative positions, anticipating readers' expectations and responses to participate in a virtual dialogue with them. This is salient characteristics to be considered by the writers in writing in a second language because a diverse interpretation among readers will be appearing. Paltridge (2004, p. 87) claimed that students need to consider the intended audience for their text, how their audience will react to what they read, and the criteria they will use for evaluating and responding to what they have written. Following this, Henderson and Moran (2010, p. 30) also state that all the factors that influence the writing task, including the writing purpose and the intended audience, should be aware of before writing. What is more, having organized a succinct writing indicates that the writer should successfully formulate a logical and well-structured essay by avoiding vague or wordy (Giltrow, 2002, p. 26). The pattern of the structure is definitely based on the provision of the second language. This nevertheless causes the difficulties among students to produce a good quality of writing in a second language, as their first languages still often influence the rhyme of essay language.

In addition, Jones (1999) reveals, "what is immediately important could be less to do with understanding the dominant discourses of field of study and more with enhancing the use of language so that reflects the quality of thinking" (p. 43). With a requirement for further improvement of academic English registers, the students should convey the ideas into the essays obviously that the writing then become communicable and reliable (Yuniarti & Trisnawati, 2018). In relation to this, Schleppegrell (2004, p. 173), in her research, found that it is not surprising that some second language writers, even as third and fourth year university students, still have difficulty with the technical and scientific writing required in their field of study. The extending of the intention of writing also shows that the writers should be aware of asserting the language since the



cultural value and readership aspect cannot be separated each other. Ivanič and Weldon (1999) have concluded about this issue that “writing consists of three interlocking dimensions: the written text itself, the social interaction which surrounds the production of the text, and the socio-cultural context within which this social interaction takes place” (p. 168). In line with this overview, Shields (2010, p. 6) agreed that to be successful, the academic culture, including behavior, value and attitudes, should be adapted to the writing.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study aims to investigate the students’ experiences in constructing academic writing. The participants were two Indonesian students who were studying their master’s program at the University of Adelaide. The procedure of data collection included interviewing the participants in order to acquire more ethnographic data concerning the academic literacy and its improvement. All of the presented questions in the interview were open-ended. Nyamathi and Shuler (1990) describe this type of questions as “Using multifaceted approaches, well thought-out questions which are primarily open-ended allow the participants freedom to respond from a variety of dimensions” (p. 1285).

The interview sessions were taken in different time for both participants to avoid the bias of the answers as well as to acquire more reliable information. As has been mentioned earlier that the researchers took notes while interviews were running, instead of recording by using electronic equipment.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having taken notes from the available answers as the documentation files, the following are the results from the interview analysis.

### *RESPONSES OF PARTICIPANT 1*

There were two interview sessions taken with Participant 1 to gather data on the obstacles faced while writing academically. The influencing factors included peer-study, teachers and other competent staff assistance who had facilitated and got involved for her success. The list of interview’s questions and its explanation are as follows:

#### *1. How do you select the topic of your writing?*

From this question, it is known that the writing stages started by firstly read the assignment task and the essay assessment rubric before choosing the interesting topic

to be written. It is continued by outlining the essay and discussing with the lecturers to ask for the approval. The underlined point to be deep analyzed here is about *the interesting topic* and *outlining the essay*. What and how is the interesting topic for the participant; how does she outline the essay? It is therefore required further interview to look insight into these issues. It is then known that the topic is interesting if it is related to her previous knowledge in the bachelor degree; contain the issues of Indonesian educational system, especially Mathematics; and previous work experiences. In terms of the outlining procedure, it is conducted through dot points in order to alleviate the writing process; from introduction, contents or body of the essay and conclusion. However, this strategy could be changed after consulting with the tutors.

2. *A. How do you approach the writing of the essay?*  
*B. Do you change your approach depending on the subject or topic of the essay? If so, how?*

The response of these questions is about similar to the first one, as the participant starts designing the outline before searching the appropriate literature that matches the intended essay topic. The supported literature is collected from the academic websites, including Google scholar and Educational databases which are available on the university websites address. Having collected the suitable resources, the writing is started in sequence stages from introduction to the conclusion. The interesting point to be emphasized in this question is that the participant is comfortable and confident with the approach she has already had for the writing. It might be changed if it is necessary, which is based on the tutors' suggestions.

3. *How do you find the references to support your writing?*

It is revealed that the participant is familiar with accessing the University websites to find the reliable sources for her writing. Some useful journals are found through Google Scholar and appropriate books are available on library catalogues.

4. *What do you find easy or difficult when writing the essay?*

The participant responded to this question that it is deemed to be difficult in writing critically. What critically means according to the participant is that it is not supposed to be superficial. Therefore the writing should be expanded and explained the idea thoroughly by providing enough evidence to strengthen the writing. Another important point to be noted regarding the difficulties of writing is about the issue of ESL background. The participant also added that she does not have enough experiences in

writing academically. What makes another problem related to academic writing is that about the lecturers' judgment, she noted.

5. *Do the people around you, especially friends, contribute to overcome the difficulties of your academic writing? How?*

Peer assessment is one of supportive contribution in gaining the progress of academic writing. The participant constantly asks for proofreading the essays to the peers before submitting to the lecturers. This is important to determine the grammatical errors, for example, to check the sentence coherence as well as to detect the spelling errors.

6. *Does being in an Australian university influence the development of your academic writing? How?*

Being overseas undeniably provides the participant with positive effects regarding the improvement of academic writing. She is accustomed to using the language as it is found in an everyday life. Even though she learns more about writing through trial and error concept, the university environment does the encouraging circumstances of academic writing.

7. *Are there any other ways that you try to improve your academic writing?*

According to the participant, there are many other ways to improve writing in the university context. The most crucial work to do is that reading some educational books and journals to ascertain the inspiration and the idea for writing. She sometimes extracts the idea from the books she read and expresses it by using her own words into the writing. Adopting the author's style of writing and imitating new or special term from the books is also the useful strategy to be used to overcome the difficulties of the academic writing.

#### *RESPONSES OF PARTICIPANT 2*

Similar to the participant 1, there were two sessions of interview with participant 2 who also experienced some difficulties in writing the essays academically. The responses can be seen in the following:

1. *How do you select the topic of your writing?*

The participant generally chooses the topic that is related to the study preference and should be useful for further experience in teaching context. Some topics, sometimes, are raised in the class discussions.

2. *A. How do you approach the writing of the essay?*

*B. Do you change your approach depending on the subject or topic of the essay? If so, how?*

For this question, the participant explained that firstly, she read some articles and books in relation to the topic chosen, and then extract the ideas to start brainstorming. Once this section finished, she continued to write the outline and draft of the essays. While writing, she reread the articles or the books to consult the argument in depth. In terms of the use of approach in writing, it is known that she conducts unchanged approach for each writings as the reason that she does not have previous experience in academic writing.

3. *How do you find the references to support your writing?*

Similar to P1, P2 accesses the university websites to find out some books or journals to support her writing in spite of using some readers provided by the lecturers.

4. *What do you find easy or difficult when writing the essay?*

In this section, she spontaneously stated that writing is difficult due to some factors. Lack of vocabularies to replace the synonym of the words leading to paraphrasing ability is one of the issues, followed by ESL background, which is similar to P1's. The aptitude of understanding reading is another factor that shows the difficulties of the writing. Regarding this, she said that she needs 2 to 3 times reading to understand its contents. In essay writing section, additionally, she pointed out that discussion part is the most difficult one as she has lack ideas to analyze or criticize.

5. *Do the people around you, especially friends, contribute to overcome the difficulties of your academic writing? How?*

According to her, peer assessment is helpful to proofread the writing before it is submitted to the lecturers. At this point, it is recognized that even though she is provided with the feedback of writing, she still repeated the same mistakes.

6. *Does being in an Australian university influence the development of your academic writing? How?*

The Australian university circumstances provide her with the positive influences regarding the academic writing. Conducting an everyday learning tasks and activities in the university context, she accustomed to demonstrating the writing ability such as essay and literature review. Doing these activities continuously helps her to overcome her writing difficulties.

7. *Are there any other ways that you try to improve your academic writing?*

Some other ways to stimulate her in academic writing is by imitating the books authors' style of writing as well the use of particular terms, more reading on published articles regarding the topic chosen whilst writing and applying the critical feedback obtained from friends or lecturers into writing properly.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Both students experienced a variety of issues regarding their difficulties in writing academically. ESL background was one of those that influenced their style of writing. Yet, they were able to adapt and adopt to the new circumstances at Adelaide that brought them to new experiences in terms of academic life. In order to improve their skills in writing, the students also enriched their readings on articles and some academic journals related to the topic of their writings. Peer review, in addition, was another essential aspect that has assisted them to proofread their writings. In brief, developing size of vocabulary was crucial to improve the students' skill of writing.

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