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The Dark Tower: Student's Perception on Academic Writing

Introduction

Writing skill is essential in the language aspect to be mastered by university students, one of them is academic writing, and it is one of the main pillars in teaching and learning activities at the university level that must be improved. Writing for academic purpose is mostly done by lecturers and students at universities. For lecturer, the implementation of Tridarma Perguruan Tinggi (Three Pillars of Higher Education Three Pillars of Higher Education comprising Education, Research and Community Service) were carried out based on academic and scientific principles of systematic and empiric frameworks. Lecturers write academic paper in research reports, journal articles, learning modules, reference books, and other purposes related to the Tridharma of Higher Education. For students, the topics or classes required compulsory requirements for students to write for assignments, such as essays in each topic and the thesis and dissertation or journal article as one of the final assignments for the final year students.

In addition, Indonesia Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched new policy known as Kampus Merdeka Merdeka Belajar (The Independent Campus, Freedom to Learn). Hence, Indonesian higher education institutions currently applied the policy of case-based and project-based approach to each topics offered in university curriculum, which definitely require a form of academic writing, including research or program proposals or reports on their activities. Academic writing skills are needed by students to complete various academic tasks. Thus, any inquiry for academic writing improvement for students is imperative in the higher education academic context.

This study aims to explore and investigate the first year undergraduate students" perception on academic writing and describe Gorontalo university students" personal view of themselves in the mastery level of academic writing skill. By doing this research, the researchers expected that the study can help the students indentifying their knowledge on academic writing, explore the obstacles faced by the students in academic writing, both in Indonesian and English, and describe the strategies, solutions, or approaches to help the students with the barriers the students faced during their study in writing their academic paper.

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The Dark Tower: Student's Perception on Academic Writing

by Turnitin Cek

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Academic writing is any formal writing produced in educational and academic discipliens setting, used by students, professors, researchers, teacher in form of evidence-based, logical and formal writing pieces such as project papers, reports, research articles, thesis, and many academic writing forms in any specific discipline with different length (Bailey, 2011; Brodhacker, 2016; Brookes & Grundy, 2000 : Hartley & Cabanac, 2016;

Leo, 2014; Hooper et all, 2021). Students" academic writing were explored by many researcher (Hansin & Samari, 2020; Mascle, 2013), self perception on academic writing (Shah et all, 2011), and self-eficacy level (Wang, 2013), and the academic writing problems (Ekanjume-Ilongo and Morato-Maleke, 2020; Lee et all, 2020; Qamariah et all, 2020).

According to previous studies, some characteristics or basic and features of academic Writing, are: clear and limited focus, logical structure and organisation, evidence-based arguments, non-biased, (Fulwiler, 2012;Hartley, 2008, Murphy, 2006; Vo, 2019; Yanti, et al, 2018) . This means, academic writing must follow aspect of academic writing to produce good piece of writing, including clear paragraph which relate to topic of writing focus of discussion, consistent structure, citation and referencing style, supported by evidences and facts, and logical, objective and non-biased deliveries in the language and writing tones (Murray, 2010)

There are some problems that faced by university students in academic writing, including plagiarism, grammatical errors, lexical difficulties, and lack of planning, the inability to plan content and organisation of writing, phoneme clusters, spellings, grammar, mistakes due to first structure, doubling of subjects, language interference, doubling of preposition, articles, tenses, appropriate vocabulary, wrong use of prefixes, and suffixes and language proficiency (Al-Khairy, 2013; Al Murshindi, Khadijah, 2020; Dwihandini, et all, 2013; Khan, 2011; Khatter, 2019; Mattarima & Hamdan, 2011; Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Yuwono, 2005).

Method

Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach with an appreciative study in Gorontalo higher education setting. This research aims to have an in-depth exploration of university students ,,lived experiences and stories and explore their understanding of academic writing in the university setting, thus qualitative fit the research design. The study highlights and recognises the importance of capturing

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the students" experiences and discovering the meaning of what experiences the students as participants had (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). By this qualitative study, the researchers were able to explore phenomena, such as feelings or thought processes from the university students in their context as first year university students in Gorontalo higher education setting (Cresswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).Thus,it is appropriate to explored and recognisedthe participants" perceptions and lived experiences of their understanding about academic writing (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013)

Participants

The participants were university students who were in their first year of study and took academic writing in their course. The participants" demography profiles were (1) both male and female students who are 18-23 years old, (2) the ethnic group belongs to Gorontalonesse and Bolaang Mongondow (3) High School and Vocational High School Student graduates. The participants were purposively selected (Cresswell 2009) by requesting assistance the course teaching teams to share the information with the student boards in the deparment. There were 60studentsfrom two classes as the participant pools, but only 25 who agreed to be the participants in the personal interview and 10 students were successfully recruited to take part in the focus group discussion. The researchers coded interviews and pseudo names for universities, departments and the participants to keep the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants as they might be exposed due to small number of participants and belonged to certain course in their department.

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted through interview and focus group discussion to explore the participants" knowledge, attitudes, and understanding of what they had been experiences in their academic writing class and their strategies in writing their essay assignment for other topics. The personal interview and questions were specifically developed to explore participants" personal views and their stories of academic writing class and related assignments and their understanding of their experiences on those contexts. Focus group discussion and developed topics were expounded to explore the participants" meaning-making, thoughts and role-definition as students (Bryman, 2016: Merriam, 1998). In this context, researchers

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positioned themselves as an outsider and inside of the participants worlds (Zulystiawati, 2020); both as lecturer who was in touch with academic writing quite often and as individual researcher who was in the position of not knowing the participants understanding and view academic writing.

The data was being collected by conducting a semi-structured interview to allow the researchers to explore and investigated the stories and experiences conveyed by the participants (Bryman, 2016). A semi-structured interview was developed through a cycle of personal interviews and focus group discussion, discussing the participants" views on academic writing. Due to time constraints, personal interviews were conducted for only 45 minutes and focus group discussions were lasted for 120 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants. The interviews took place in a private room in a place best suited to the participants and held outside of class hours and according to the schedule of each student and whole group for focus group discussion.

Data Analysis

The data analysis will employ thematic analysis. Interviews then were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2014). The process was as follows: (1) each interview transcript was read several times to develop familiarisation with the data, (2) potential codes were generated, (3) established initial codes to be sorted into core themes and subthemes, (4) Themes were then reviewed, refined, defined into appropriate categories, then (5) naming the themes and present the result as the final product (Zulystiawati, 2020), which are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Core and Sub Themes

Core Themes	Sub-Themes
Student's Perception and Attitudes towards Academic Writing	• Academic Writing is Scarry • No Previous Knowledge • Barriers to Academic Writing
Students' Expectation	• Tutorial Classes for Basic Writing • Training Sessions for Advance Writing

And the final phase is (6) producing the report by writing up the result and discussing with developing the themes into representing the participants' words and meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Zulystiawati, 2020).

Ethical Consideration

The research utilized purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), and the study was voluntary to avoid coercion, hence, the sample of the study was only those who gave their consent to participate in this study. In this study, investigations on the confidentiality of respondents, journal documents and interview results will not be considered to be published and shown in any research outcomes, including the research report. The confidentiality of this information is to protect the respondents due to the sensitive information that might include in their answers. Participants were 18-23 years old and they were given full written informed consent after were fully debriefed about the consent content to maintain the privacy and confidentiality (Zulystiawati, 2020) of each student.

Result and Discussion

As explained in the above section, this study aimed to have an in-depth exploration and understanding of the
university students" perception on academic writing in their context in Gorontalo higher education. This issue was worthwhile being investigated due to the current practices in writing classes. The interview results and stories from the participants were collected and analysed and further presented into two core themes and sub-themes that emerged from interviews. As the nature of this study, we preferred firstly to report and further
explore the students" perception and attitudes towards academic writing as the fundamental core theme as indicated in the data collection and analysis process. This first core theme consisted of three sub-themes, namely Student"s Perception and Attitudes towards Academic Writing (sub-themes including Academic Writing is Scary, No Previous Knowledge in Academic Writing, Barriers to academic writing). The second core theme was Students" Expectation consisted of two sub-themes (sub-themes including Tutorial Class for basic writing and Training Session for advance writing). The core themes and sub-themes are further elaborated below respectively.

Students' Perception and Attitudes towards Academic

Our anaylsis revealed that there were some students" perceptions and attitudes towards academic writing. They were academic writing is scary, no previous

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knowledge and the last was barriers to academic writing. These sub themes are explained below respectively.

Academic Writing is Scary

This sub-theme was related to the participants" explanation on how they perceived their experiences towards the academic writing. Most of the participants expressed that they were afraid and felt insecure when they have to write academically. Below were some examples of the participants expressions which indicated their feeling towards academic writing.

"Writing academically is something that I want to avoid, if I could" (Budi)

" If I may choose, I prefer to run for 5K than doing academic writing" (Bayu)

"Everytime, it is the schedule for academic writing class, I am a bit nervous and uncomfortable" (Diana)

"The feeling is similar to sitting in a test room for an examination" (Farhan)

The above excerption indicated that some of the participants were psychologically insecure when they were assigned to make a write a piece of academic writing.

No Previous Knowledge

The analysis also revealed that almost all the participants had no previous knowledge and experiences of academic writing. This fact happened because most of the participants were not taught what academic writing is and its form and how to make it when they were in the senior high school. The following quotations from the participants indicate that they had had only a few knowledge and experiences in regard to academic writing.

"I never been informed or assigned to make any academic writing when I was in senior high school"
(Julian)

"It is an familiar term and practice as this is still exactly new for me" (Sarah)

"As far as I remember, I was only asked to summarise the topics that we learned, which was easy for me as I just need to rewrite the main

information that I read and got from the reading that the teacher gave to the students" (Berta)

Barrier to Academic Writing

The participants of this current study shared that they have had some obstacles when they made a piece of academic writing. Amongst these barriers, for examples, was language matter. From the analysis it was found that most of the participants experienced problem of the academic writing is to use formal language appropriately. There were large number of participants who was not used to using standard form of the language of medium of instruction in the classroom, in this case Indonesian. Below were some excerps shared by some of the participants who admitted that they mostly used local dialect or their mother tongue and/or its dialect when they were in the classroom even during the presentation.

> "I am very much influenced by my mother tongue and/or its dialect when I talked in the class both in formal or informal meeting. I believed that this condition also affect my ability to write academically" (Bayu)

> "When I was in senior high school, my friend and I even my teacher I think, were using informal language when we were interacting during teaching and learning process. Therefore, I found it is difficult to express my idea into writing using formal and standard form of Indonesian Language" (Julian)

Another barrier as indicated by the data analysis was that there was less or even no encouragement of academic writing culture. From the excerpts presented below, it was found that there was no enough culture and habitus of academic writing. What they shared revealed that the participants experienced barriers in academic writing due to the lack of having writing academic culture. Furthermore, it is also found that there was no culture and habitus of practicing and having creative and critical thinking. Besides, these practices of academic writing were not promoted or encouraged in school cultures started from elementary school to senior high school.

> "What I like from Senior High School was that we were not forced to make any academic writing for all of the subject" (Farhan)

"I think we were spoiled back to the teaching and leaning process in Elementary School, Junior High School and even Senor High school as we were assigned to make any of academic writing. I think that we were not encouraged to make academic writing" (Sarah)

Students' Expectation

Our analysis revealed that all of the participants of this present study expect something more that they could utilise to help them to improve their academic writing skills which they have not experienced in the previous school level. In general, the participants expected help and support from university, including faculty and department and other supporting system such as library and teaching staff to provide them useful facilities and resources. These all supporting sytem as well as human capital would be a great assistance for these students in improving their academic writing skills as one of the core activities in academic affairs in the class and kampus life. There were two main expectations of the participants which presented below respectively *Tutorial Classes for Basic Writing*

The participants pointed out that they were in need of a kind of tutorial class for basic writing. In this tutorial class, the research participants were looking for some additional knowledge and experiences in relation to writing. From the excerps that illustrated below, it was known that the participants still need some explanations on how to construct a sentence, and paragraph. They also still in need of explanation on the different from any kinds of paragraph and how to develop a paragraph into an essay or even into a piece of academic writing.

"I want to study and practice more on how to make a good academic writing which I believed should be started from how to a good sentence and then a paragraph" (Diana)

"Probably, I will like to write academic writing if I know better how to make a good paragraph" (Budi)

"I am still confused what a good sentence should be. But, if there is a tutorial class, I will enrolled myself. So, I will be more confident in doing my task regarding academic writing" (Farhan).

> "Talking about academic writing, I prefer to have a direct face to face tutorial class than find it out through the internet as I know for sure that it will end up in watching Youtube, hahahah" (Julian)

Training Sessions for Advance Writing

Our analysis indicated that some of the participants have had good understanding and experiences on writing but not with academic writing. It is, therefore, they were expecting a kind of training sessions for advance writing to enable them to be better in doing academic writing. They also revealed that they want to get assistance from university either through its facilities and resources to help them in regard to advance writing to improve their academic writing skills. Below are some excerpts shared by the participants which illustrated what they actually need from the university in order to support them to elevate their experiences and skills in relation to academic writing.

> "I need a kind of service provided by the university where I can consult my assignments before I submit them to enable me to gain good score for my Mid and Final Semester as what I will have written and submitted meet the standard of academic writing" (Rian)

> "I got lower score for my last assignment as my Lecturer found that there were many sentences that I copied and pasted from the Internet. I do not know that I must quote them appropriately and wrote those resources in the references list. Therefore, I need such a training session for this" (Richard)

> "I need a training session where I can gain some more knowledge and experiences in relation to how to cite and all about references" (Hanna).

> "I am also wondering how to make my references automatically listed without manually write them down one by one which of course a waste of time and energy. Even, most of the time, I need to reorder the authors"name alphabetically over and over again (Brian)

Conclusion

The study was conducted primarily to answer researchers" curiosity on Gorontalo higher education students perceived academic writing since the Indonesia Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched new policy known as

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Kampus Merdeka Merdeka Belajar (The Independent Campus, Freedom to Learn). The first-year students must keep-up with the case-based and project-based assignments which require scientific and academic reports on the activities. Moreover, the first year of undergraduate students in Gorontalo suffered from writing culture they experienced in primary education to secondary education. Inability to write academically from beginning, inability to recognize and avoid plagiarism, language barriers and different academic atmosphere at university caused the students to feel pressure and need help with their academic writing. These first-year students expected supports in basic and advance writing training session. This study also provided feedback and basic consideration for the department and teaching staff to provide some valuable strategies and approaches in improving students" academic writing by mapping the students" writing level and provide appropriate support for students.

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