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ACADEMIC WRITING DIFFICULTIES FOR INDONESIAN STUDENTS IN PURSUING POSTGRADUATE STUDIES ABROAD

by

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Abstract:

Academic writing skills have become an essential aspect that Indonesian students must focus on, especially for those planning or pursuing their postgraduate studies abroad. The current research investigates the difficulties Indonesian students face who currently pursue or recently completed their postgraduate studies in seven countries with different majors. The subject was seven Indonesian students who studied in India, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Poland. The researcher used the qualitative research method under the phenomenology procedure to collect the data. Two questionnaires in the form of open-ended questions were distributed and fulfilled by all research participants. The findings indicate that Indonesian students who pursued postgraduate study abroad faced difficulties in academic writing practice, for instance, paraphrasing the sentence, assuring coherence, formulating cohesion, and expressing their voice. Besides, some also needed help choosing appropriate words and relevant topics in their writing. The main factors contributing to the difficulties are less academic writing practice, lack of vocabulary, and unfamiliarity with academic writing structure. Even though the students pursued different majors and countries, they needed help with writing academic writing. Moreover, cultural differences also influence students' difficulties.

Keywords: *academic writing, writing difficulties, postgraduate students, study abroad*

Abstrak:

Keterampilan menulis akademik telah menjadi aspek penting yang harus menjadi fokus siswa Indonesia, terutama bagi mereka yang merencanakan atau melanjutkan studi pascasarjana mereka di luar negeri. Penelitian saat ini menyelidiki kesulitan yang dihadapi siswa Indonesia

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yang saat ini mengejar atau baru saja menyelesaikan studi pascasarjana mereka di tujuh negara dengan jurusan yang berbeda. Subjek penelitian adalah tujuh mahasiswa Indonesia yang belajar di India, Australia, Inggris, Irlandia, Belanda, dan Polandia. Peneliti menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif di bawah prosedur fenomenologi untuk mengumpulkan data. Dua kuesioner dalam bentuk pertanyaan terbuka dibagikan dan dipenuhi oleh semua peserta penelitian. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa Indonesia yang melanjutkan studi pascasarjana di luar negeri menghadapi kesulitan dalam praktik penulisan akademik, misalnya, memparafrasekan kalimat, memastikan koherensi, merumuskan kohesi, dan mengekspresikan suara mereka. Selain itu, beberapa juga membutuhkan bantuan memilih kata-kata yang tepat dan topik yang relevan dalam tulisan mereka. Faktor utama yang berkontribusi terhadap kesulitan adalah praktik menulis akademik yang kurang, kurangnya kosa kata, dan ketidaktahuan dengan struktur penulisan akademik. Meskipun para siswa mengejar jurusan dan negara yang berbeda, mereka membutuhkan bantuan untuk menulis tulisan akademik. Selain itu, perbedaan budaya juga mempengaruhi kesulitan siswa.

Kata kunci: *menulis akademik, kesulitan menulis, mahasiswa pascasarjana, belajar di luar negeri*

INTRODUCTION

Studying overseas programs has been seen as a current concern in education (Nanda, 2019). However, while completing their study abroad, students from non-native English-speaking countries must face a concerning difficulty which, in one way or another, affects their graduation process, for instance, in writing academic papers in English. Previous research on English difficulties, especially in writing, has provided specific conclusions from students from non-English speaking countries. Higher education students need help to accomplish the standard of university requirements regarding academic writing skills, affecting their academic performance (Hamamah & Hapsari, 2021). Other studies have also exhibited similar findings about problems in academic writing. One of the significant findings of these pieces of research shows that international students studying at English-speaking universities were still lacking in both writing and speaking skills, meaning they still need intensive practice to improve both skills (Ramachandran, 2011; Sin Wei Yeoh & R Terry, 2013; Strauss, 2012). Some studies of experiences are from Yamen (Al-Jaro et al., 2019), Oman (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015), and Iraq (Nasser, 2018). The studies claimed that students who pursued their study abroad experienced difficulties using correct tenses, punctuation, and spelling. They also needed help voicing their thoughts, including finding relevant topics and sources. Besides, in Malaysia (Singh, 2015) and China (Gang Li et al., 2010), the students experienced obstacles while practicing academic writing in an instructional setting where English has been applied as a medium language. A similar case is also exhibited by Indonesian students (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Ningsih, 2016; Yaqin, 2015). They faced grammatical difficulties, formulated the right coherence and cohesion, and developed the

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ideas in their essay. It happens because of knowledge limitations in both conceptions of critical thinking and perception in implementing academic writing. Moreover, The students from Indonesia who took the TESOL major at several universities in the United Kingdom experienced four majors problems in academic writing, such as coherence and cohesion, lack of relevant ideas, lack of evaluation, and lack of attention to the essential aspects in academic writing (Samanhudi & Linse, 2019).

Naturally, these difficulties emerge from the cognitive component of attitudes, referring to their beliefs and thoughts when they write a scientific paper (Akhtar, 2020). Students are more pressured with negative attitudes and apprehension in their first year when they force themselves to follow the regulation from their institutions to perform to the best of their academic skills (Che Hassan et al., 2019). In another way, low interest in writing reports and the like is a significant influence in line with their inadequate grammar comprehension. The students forcefully themselves in order to follow the regulation from higher institutions. The students felt difficulties mainly in the first year of university-level studies. The research on students' attitudes toward academic writing indicated that they need more confidence due to the obstacles they have experienced in writing (Akhtar, 2020). It happened because the students had a low interest in academic writing.

Most researchers only researched one field of study or focused on one country. However, this study examines how the attitudes and challenges of writing academic papers in English result when observed in Indonesian students from different majors studying in different countries. In addition, this study also wants to enrich the scholarship of academic writing in general, as the writing issues of EFL postgraduate students are often overlooked in Indonesia. Hence, the finding of this research would be beneficial for future students who want to go abroad to pursue their postgraduate studies to enhance their potential in writing skills by providing some notes of the significant difficulties.

Academic writing is one of the evaluations that force the students to demonstrate their knowledge and proficiency with specific disciplinary skills, thinking, describing, and presenting (Aunurrahman et al., 2017). As it is a mental and cognitive activity that presents the product of the mind, academic writing can be identified as the form and development of techniques. For example, formulating and assuring students' ideas and training their critical thinking skills in developing vocabulary and grammar, mainly if they write in their second or

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foreign language (Abdulkareem, 2013; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Fadda, 2012). According to the University of Sydney (2019), there are four main types of academic writing: critical, analytical, descriptive, and persuasive. To master academic writing, students require a clear understanding of numerous purposes and knowledge of the topics of students' compositions (Graham, 2010). The students can be considered good writers in academic writing when they can provide clear and concise ideas (Turner, 2011). In the term of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), students are required to understand the structure of academic writing form, for instance, expand ideas, manage relevant approaches, and discover the appropriate words. Nevertheless, Indonesian students find academic writing difficult as English is not their second language.

Asian students who studied at Western universities often experienced academic writing failure, for instance, while writing an argumentation essay (Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020). Besides, Bacha (2010) as cited in Islamiyah and Al Fajri (2020) and Davies (2008) stated that almost all students needed help understanding the assignments given by the lecturer and experienced difficulties in writing long sentences (Gang Li et al., 2010). Meanwhile, Malaysian students needed help to provide transparent information in academic writing and relevant ideas (micro and macro level). They need to improve in academic writing practice, negative attitude, writing strategies, punctuation errors, conditional sentences, and other elements of writing skills. For example, they need help with correct grammar, misspelling, conventions, identifying capital letters, inserting punctuation, and other aspects of writing.

On the other hand, Malaysian ESL students discovered several academic difficulties in writing the assignment, especially in the use of tenses and punctuation (Adas & Bakir, 2013; Ghabool et al., 2012). Research on academic writing challenges has also been established in China. According to Zhang & Zhou (2011), academic writing is the central issue for Chinese international students, particularly for students majoring in the humanities or social sciences. Moreover, the fear of students from non-English backgrounds causes them to have low motivation and need more confidence in expressing their ideas. It can even be the biggest challenge that can make students unable to write academically and succeed in their academic learning (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Žefran, 2015).

Upon all, The researcher has formulated the research questions into three parts:

1. What is the student's attitude toward Academic writing?

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2. How do Indonesian students from different universities experience difficulties in academic writing while pursuing postgraduate studies?
3. What are the key factors that influence the difficulties in academic writing?

METHOD

Design

The study employs qualitative description under a phenomenology procedure, and the topic needs to be explored thoroughly (Lee McKay, 2006). Thus, this study seeks to answer the research questions. This study explores the lived experience of Indonesian postgraduates from three angles; attitude toward academic writing, difficulties, and the key factors that influence their academic writing.

Participant

The subjects of this research were 7 Indonesian students pursuing or recently completed a postgraduate program from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, Netherlands, Poland, and India with different majors. These students were chosen based on a purposive random sampling in which several criteria needed to be fulfilled: (1) Indonesian students who pursued their postgraduate program in another country, (2) students who recently completed a postgraduate study for less than one year, (3) students who have experience in writing an academic essay, (4) students who have a minimum of 6 months of studying abroad, (5) students who faced problems related to academic writing. All these steps are essential to make the researcher able to collect accurate data.

All of them have taken IELTS/ TOEFL as one of the essential requirements to study abroad. This qualitative research concentrates on a few people involved in this research. However, the data allow numerous participants to access information (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). The following list summarizes the information of these students, including their age, gender, first language, and university country.

Table 1. Students' information

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Name	Age	Gender	Language	Country
Respondent 1	23	F	Indonesia	Australia
Respondent 2	26	F	Indonesia	Australia
Respondent 3	26	M	Indonesia	Ireland
Respondent 4	24	M	Indonesia	India
Respondent 5	29	F	Indonesia	Netherland
Respondent 6	25	F	Indonesia	Poland
Respondent 7	27	F	Indonesia	UK

Instrument

The study employed two instruments to gain the data. The researcher used a set of questionnaires validated by the previous researcher (Al-Badi, 2015) by conducting a pilot study. There are four categories in questionnaires, such as students' detailed information (section 1), students' writing strategies and behavior (section 2), learners' attitudes toward writing assignments, and the references they mostly use for their assignments (section 3), and the last is the difficulties they face when writing (section 4). These questionnaires also put several close-end questions.

Data collection & data analysis

Questionnaire 1 was distributed to 7 students through jotform. The questions were organized by the researcher using a Google Form, and they were disseminated via private WhatsApp chat. First, the participants were informed of the study's goal to uphold the investigation's ethical standards (Creswell, 2007). All the research participants were requested to fulfill Questionnaire 2 to receive deeper information related to Questionnaire 1, and most of the questions required students' explanations in Questionnaire 1. All 7 participants have fulfilled both questionnaires. Besides, the researcher collected both questionnaires and confirmed them as accurate. Additionally, the data were evaluated in order to receive the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section provides answers to the survey questions (attachment 1). The questions showed the form from the most difficult to the easiest. The four main issues confirmed by the respondents are listed and discussed in the pie and bar charts description.

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Attitudes of the respondents toward academic writing

This section provides answers to the survey questions (attachment 1). The questions showed the form from the most difficult to the easiest. The four main issues reported by the respondents are listed and discussed in the pie chart description about an attitude toward scientific writing.

Attitudes of the respondents toward academic writing

Figure 1 illustrates the respondents' opinions in academic writing from seven Indonesian students who currently pursue or have done postgraduate programs in different countries, such as India, Australia, Uk, the Netherlands, Poland, and Ireland. All the units are measured in percentages.

Through this finding, the researcher discovered that most Indonesian students studying in six countries encountered negative attitudes toward academic writing. A similar finding also has been found from Malaysian students who were more pressured with negative attitudes and apprehension in their first year when they forced themselves to follow the regulation from their institutions to perform to the best of their academic skills (Che Hassan et al., 2019). Overall, the data indicated that almost all the students discovered that English academic writing is **relatively easy** (57.2%). It also shows that the students consider academic writing **complicated (14.3% and 14.3%, respectively)**. The students have disclosed the reason in open-ended questions from the questionnaires whether the student find difficulties and why;

“Yes, because I was usually habitual with basic English conversation. Writing assignments from college use different vocabulary and writing styles.”^{xa}

These reasons also reflected the previous findings in Malaysia (Singh, 2015) and China (Gang Li et al., 2010), where the students experienced obstacles while practicing academic writing in an instructional setting where English has been applied as a medium language. However, despite the negative attitudes toward academic writing, the most significant result showed that one student who achieved 6.5 bands for IELTS writing had stated **easily** in academic writing. Nevertheless, she was putting a comment in open-ended questions that mentioned, but she still faced difficulty paraphrasing and expressing her idea in sentences. Additionally, 40% of the students also mentioned that they **sometimes and rarely** write for pleasure in English, which means they prefer to write their language.

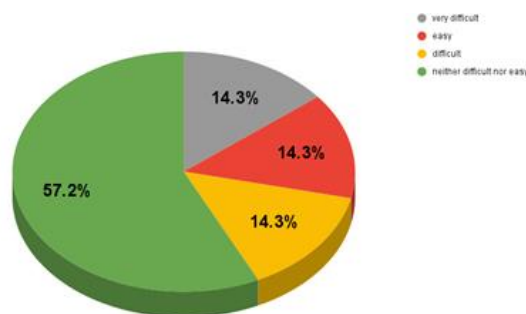


Figure 1: Attitudes of participants toward academic writing

The significant difficulties encountered by students when writing assignments

Based on the data collected, all the respondents have taken IELTS academic writing to fulfill one of the requirements of an abroad university document. From the questionnaires, the majority of the data represent that the students received an average IELTS band score of 6.5. This score is indicated that they have a good level of English writing. However, the students claimed they still faced some difficulties in academic writing.

Besides, in the questionnaires, the students have chosen several significant difficulties in academic writing. In this section, they were allowed to choose multiple options. According to the respondents' responses, three significant difficulties have been chosen. They all agreed that *paraphrasing, expressing their voice, and coherence & cohesion* are the most significant difficulties in academic writing. The previous finding shows that Indonesian students who took the TESOL major in the United Kingdom experienced four majors problems in academic writing, such as coherence and cohesion, lack of relevant ideas, lack of evaluation, and lack of attention to the essential aspects of academic writing (Samanhudi & Linse, 2019).

Some respondents also considered language use, referencing & citation as the other problems in writing postgraduate assignments. Additionally, only one student has chosen *an important topic* as her problem in academic writing. The reason for the problem can be identified from the close-ended question discussed in the following discussion.

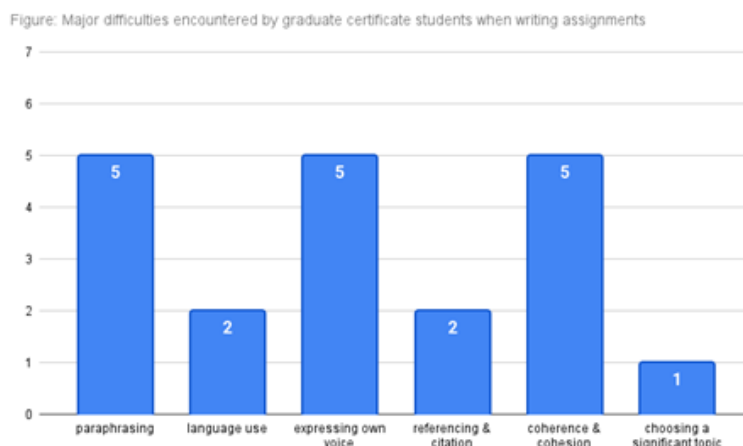


Figure2: The major difficulties experienced by graduate students when writing assignments

Paraphrasing & expressing own voice

The other highest academic problem faced by Indonesian postgraduate students who pursue their studies abroad is paraphrasing sentences. Even though they pursued different universities and countries, all seven students admitted that paraphrasing had become one of their major issues in academic writing. The challenges of paraphrasing in academic writing might happen because of a lack of academic vocabulary and an inability to understand the instructions given from the text or by lecturers in assignments. Besides, the student claimed in the questionnaires that university writing assignments required appropriate academic vocabulary.

Based on the previous research from the theories above, less practice in academic writing could be another reason the students experienced some obstacles in expressing their voice. Seven students also agreed that expressing their voices is difficult while writing an essay or assignment from the university. The previous research has found that some significant problems, like negative students’ attitudes towards writing from the university level, such as nervousness and fear in academic writing classrooms (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; White & Hall, 2014) and the majority of the reading-writing habit of Indonesian students, and Indonesian students in particular. Similarly, some students said that they are not habitual in writing something in English academic writing styles, that have made them unable to express their ideas confidently. Another comment was mentioned by one of the respondents in an open-ended question, and the student stated:

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“It is neither difficult nor easy. I find it comfortable writing in English, but sometimes because of the two languages I speak, I often find myself unable to express it in my second language, English.”xb.

EFL students, including all research participants, need help using appropriate grammar in their academic writing. Many non-English speakers have anxiety about a mistake while using the language, including writing their ideas in English. Students struggle to express their voice in academic writing because they consider academic vocabulary and punctuation, prepositions, articles, conjunction, and other aspects in academic writing. Besides, non-English speakers also take longer to express their ideas in writing and must be stronger in choosing the right word(s) for their academic writing content. The insight provided by one of the students who is pursuing his study in Australia:

“I have to take so much time to make one paragraph. I write, then delete, I write, then delete it again. It happened many times because I was unsure whether my sentence or idea was correct.” xc.

Coherence & cohesion

When the students write any essay or assignment, they choose appropriate vocabulary, correct grammar, formulate coherence and cohesion, and share ideas logically (Al-Badi, 2015). Although 50% of students tend to prepare an outline in the questionnaires of close-ended questions and 90% revise the content while writing several sentences into a paragraph in English, seven students claimed that they still faced difficulties due to selecting appropriate ideas. They have admitted that A student who studied in the Netherlands provided insight related to the reason that academic writing is difficult:

“Writing the assignment becomes difficult because of the grammar and finding relevant content in every paragraph. Connecting one idea with other ideas is the toughest one.”xd.

This problem might happen because, based on the open-ended questionnaires, the students stated that they spend more time reading than writing. It means the students must be more habitual in practicing writing and arranging sentences academically. Besides, the other factors might be because the students must learn about one specific topic from the lecturer's assignment. It would automatically confuse the students about which idea comes first in the paragraph. Many studies have proved that Indonesian students need help to organize relevant ideas and sentences in English. They also need to gain knowledge of the academic structure

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and can use appropriate conjunction, which can be the other factor of the student's difficulties. The study by Belkhir & Benyelles (2017) stated that the cause of the student's difficulties correlating the right ideas (coherence and cohesion) was that the students had less interest in reading and spent less time practicing academic writing.

Language use and reference citation

Shaheen (2012) confirmed that students with non-English backgrounds could not quickly write their ideas academically. Similarly, it occurred to Indonesian students who pursued their studies abroad. Some students who received an IELTS writing score above 6.0 claimed that they still experienced difficulties in choosing appropriate vocabulary. The data showed that the students need to pay more attention to appropriate language use in academic writing assignments. Even though they stated that they used to discuss the assignment with the other classmate from the questionnaires, the students spent less time reviewing the final assignment. They verified the language used in their academic writing.

Choosing significant topics

Choosing the relevant topic references also influence the students' difficulties. This may happen due to misconceptions about the topic and the student's understanding. As English still becomes a foreign language for Indonesian students, this case has become a common issue for beginners in academic writing. Moreover, the cultural difference has influenced the students to choose irrelevant topics. It also proved that most students rarely discuss their final writing assignments with lecturers. The lecturers' expectations may need to be understood by students, making them conclude their opinions and things different from what they expected from the lectures.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This current research describes academic writing difficulties faced by Indonesian students pursuing or recently completing their postgraduate studies in several countries, such as India, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Netherlands. The total number of students who became research participants was seven (2 males and four females). All the research participants have collected two questionnaires that include open-ended questions. The study's findings showed that almost all students face difficulties in academic writing and

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have different difficulties. Most students claimed that Paraphrasing, Coherence and Cohesion, and Expressing their voice became the central issue in writing the academic assignment. Some students also stated that language use, references, citation, and essential topics are complex. However, the students fulfilled the second questionnaire, which consisted of open-ended questions. These questionnaires provided detailed information the students gave related to academic writing difficulties.

In conclusion, although the students pursued different majors and countries, they needed help with writing academic writing. Most students have taken IELTS writing academic and received an average of 6.5 band scores. Nevertheless, the finding showed that the students still faced difficulties in academic writing. The findings also prove no significant difference between this study and the previous studies discussed above. The students who pursued their postgraduate program from several countries and with different majors still experience the same issue in academic writing.

Finally, the suggestion for Indonesian students keen to continue their further studies abroad is requested to prepare their English, primarily focusing on academic writing. Practicing academic writing independently by summarizing an international journal, an English article, or any academic writing will familiarize the students with academic vocabulary, academic writing structures, and arranging ideas. Additionally, joining a specific program to improve writing skills is essential before taking a postgraduate program in another country, for instance, English, for academic purposes. Through this program, the students will have an instructor who can guide them in improving their academic writing. Also, the feedback that the teacher will give helps enhance the student's skill in writing.

Future studies are suggested to conduct more research as writing is crucial for Indonesian students pursuing further studies abroad. This skill becomes a massive study that the following researchers can do. For the next researcher, the researchers can use many research participants from different countries to provide massive data collection. The subsequent researchers can add an interview technique to get in-depth information with relevant studies for the data collection technique. The result of this research could be utilized to promote the best teaching methods to conduct the academic writing class presently utilized by English language instructors. The input also can be used to re-design the syllabus. Moreover, this research aims to promote Indonesian postgraduate students' needs'. Therefore, the next researcher can use mix-method to investigate students' experience in academic

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writing and academic language style faced by Indonesian International students from different countries.

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