



## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS AT IAIN KUDUS

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### ABSTRACT

*This article aims at exploring some possible challenges of opportunities of teaching English in academic writing skills for Indonesian learners at IAIN Kudus. The study anchors in a qualitative research. The observation, interview and documentation are conducted to gather data. The result indicates that numerous challenges faced by some learners from English Department at IAIN Kudus in the academic writing includes the difficulties of how to start writing, lack of both intensive and extensive reading, limited exposures to English vocabularies, and lack of interest in writing English. Besides, the opportunities that could be exposed to enhance the process of teaching academic writing skills among learners from English Department at IAIN Kudus are by sharpening their receptive skills such as reading and listening in order to gain successful productive skills including speaking and writing, asking them to be aware of paraphrasing English texts precisely, pursuing them to apply reference management tools properly in quoting a number of references comprising of books, journal articles, and so forth, using technology or digital tools such as instagram, facebook, blog, and so forth to enhance the process of teaching academic writing skills and pursuing them to take part in academic writing workshop and seminar.*

**Keywords:** *Academic Writing, Challenges, Opportunities*

### INTRODUCTION

Recently, English has become one of the most favorite subjects for Indonesian learners in some institutions. However, this condition may lead to both challenges and opportunities particularly for English teachers in teaching academic writing. Considering that English is not a mother tongue for Indonesian students, English teachers are considerably supposed to acquire a number of methods, strategies, technique and so forth in teaching English particularly the academic writing that belongs to productive skill. In

relation to writing, it quite requires more both participation and responsibility from the learners in teaching and learning process. In order to enhance the writing skill of learners, the role and effort of qualified English teachers need to be taken into account especially as a facilitator and co-contributor in the writing process.

In accordance with the academic areas, learners are badly demanded to acquire an academic writing skill in which those who are not native speakers of English mostly have problems or challenges in the written

demands of their courses. Besides learning academic English, they are pursued to adopt new conventions of style, referencing and layout (Bailey, n.d., p. vii). Further, another aspect that becomes the central to the mastery of academic writing is the development of discourse competence for the novice writer. This covers the knowledge of how to build cohesion and coherence in a text and the ability to integrate different types of knowledge in order to produce extended written discourse accurately and appropriately. Moreover, discourse widely emphasizes how to generate ideas, organize and present them in an acceptable manner to the academic community the learners are going to join and revising drafts in the light of feedback from readers (Writing, Furneaux, & Studies, 1995, p. 8).

Apart from discourse competence, another crucial aspect in the writing process is grammatical competence which refers to the knowledge of grammatical rules and lexical items in the process of writing. In addition, social-cultural models may give the contribution of developing the academic writing skill. These include creating a supportive environment consisting of more knowledgeable writers as models, advocating writing approximation as success, applying supportive dialogue that shapes the learners' thinking as they write, developing strategies of planning in creating text, using editing and revising strategies, publishing and sharing writing with real environment and audiences (Kraayenoord, Miller, & Moni, 2009, p. 25).

A number of studies related to the academic writing skills were previously conducted by researchers. A professional learning project, write ideas, can be one of the alternatives of teaching writing to students with learning difficulties in inclusive English (Kraayenoord et al., 2009, p. 23). Undergraduate students at Cape Peninsula

University of Technology (CPUT) have challenges in academic writing particularly the consequences of linguistic and general literacy backgrounds of students, the attitudes toward academic writing and the privileging of middle-class literacy practices in South African higher education (Pineteh, 2014, p. 12). Then, the challenges in English learning are found by Arabic students including the linguistic, cultural, educational, political and personal challenges (Lakshmi, 2013, p. 49). Further, the challenge mostly found by students from South Africa with limited exposure to English covers the tendency of making similar errors relating to writing and argument style and to misplaced vocabulary (Banda, 2004, p. 11).

Similarly, the challenges in learning of academic writing skill are faced by the students at IAIN Kudus considering that there are other languages they use to communicate in their society comprising of Javanese and Indonesian. Nonetheless, this article may differ from the previous studies considering that the students of IAIN Kudus have various background of language in their society comprising of Indonesian and Javanese which have various dialects. In relation to it, this paper explores the challenges and opportunities of teaching academic writing skills among students of IAIN Kudus.

## METHODS

This study anchored in a qualitative research. In order to gather data, the writer interviewed seven students of English Department at IAIN Kudus. Further, an observation was conducted both to explore and analyze the actual situation of teaching and learning process in the academic writing skills. Moreover, documentation was done by the writer to capture the experience of teaching academic writing at IAIN Kudus.

## DISCUSSION

### The Academic Writing Challenges of Students at IAIN Kudus

The students of IAIN Kudus are actually diverse both in terms of linguistic background and cognitive development. In fact, the majority of their academic writing skill needs to be improved well. Indeed, they find some problems and challenges in writing English in accordance with institutional literacy expectations which is really not their native language. Their problems in academic writing skill cover:

a. Limited Exposures to English Vocabularies

In order to write English which is in accordance with the institutional literacy expectation, learners are supposed to enrich more vocabularies including words and popular technical terms. Furthermore, writing is not only a matter of knowing grammar but also the process of writing, words organization, and acceptable content. Thus, the acquisition of vocabularies enrichment is a necessity for learners in writing English particularly for students of English Department at IAIN Kudus. In this case, their vocabularies can be categorized low so they cannot start writing something in English. In addition, the supportive exposure of using English is so limited in their society. This may hinder their acquisition in English vocabularies. Indeed, they are pursued to enrich various vocabularies in order to write various texts in English in acceptable ways. This proof is revealed by some students of English Department at IAIN Kudus:

“I realize that my vocabularies are so limited. That is why I feel difficult when I write something

in English. Further, somehow I don't know how to start writing because of the limited English vocabularies. To me, academic writing is not easy. It requires a lot of things including planning ideas, revising, organizing and evaluating. If we don't have sufficient key elements of writing, we cannot write at all”. (Hilda)

Another student also commented about academic writing:

“In my opinion, academic writing is more difficult than listening and reading. It belongs to a productive skill that needs more efforts including sufficient English vocabularies. In order to enrich them, I pursue myself to read any kind of English texts such as comic, some English quotes and so on. Nonetheless, knowing a lot of English vocabularies is one of the basic skills to be able to write in English better”. (Alfian)

The statements above indicate that the limited English vocabularies may become one of the factors that hinder them in producing English texts. Moreover, some students have to struggle to master English vocabularies as the basic requirement of writing conventions. Hence, they need to be given more exposures and opportunities to literacy including writing English texts. In addition, the professionalism of English lecturers are demanded to enhance their students in writing English by giving more exposures of using English vocabularies and qualified instructions particularly in teaching academic writing. Indeed, English teachers or lecturers should posit themselves

as the central aspect of the process of teaching academic writing including their ability to guide the students how to start writing and pay attention to crucial elements that need to be taken into account in the process of writing. These cover audience, purpose, organization, style, flow and interpretation. In this case, a good writer should consider the expectation of the audience and prior knowledge since this will affect the content of writing (Swales & Feak, n.d., p. 7). Then, a writer should set up the purpose of writing in order to be understandable and meaningful. Besides, the information of the text should be organized to readers in a structured format and academic writers need focus on the appropriate style of writing by knowing what is considered academic and what is not. The other important considerations are flow and presentation. Academic writers are supposed to manage a flow, moving from one statement in a text to the next. Finally, the information of the text should be presented in appropriate ways by using correct grammar and avoid some errors and mistakes in the writing process.

b. Lack of both Intensive and Extensive Reading

Reading is one of the activities that may contribute to store knowledge, information, and so forth. Further, it has beneficial effects particularly on second language learning acquisition. The reading activities are merely achieved by both intensive and extensive reading. With regard to intensive reading, its role cannot be neglected in vocabularies acquisition to beginners especially students at IAIN Kudus. Intensive reading can promote a base to structure and English vocabularies, develop a considerable control of language and check the degree of comprehension of

each student (Erfanpour, 2013, p. 13). Indeed, in intensive reading activities, students are enhanced to read passages in textbooks while teachers discuss the issues of grammar, vocabulary, meaning and organization of the text (Miller, 2011, p. 69). On the contrary, in extensive reading, students silently read a number quantities of materials (Aliponga, 2013, p. 73). In addition, extensive reading is considerably useful in conditions in which students shy away from speaking because of the lack of vocabularies and grammatical proficiency (Erfanpour, 2013, p. 2).

As a matter of fact, some students of English Department at IAIN Kudus have lack of motivation in reading English text both intensive and extensive reading. This condition may become a problem of their limited knowledge, information and English vocabularies. Thus, they feel difficult when trying to write something in English. Nonetheless, only a few of students have been enthusiastic to intensive reading like reading journal articles and extensive reading like reading status on facebook, commenting some quotes in instagram and so forth. The followings are the comments of student regarding their struggle in learning academic writing:

“My first language is not English. I have two other languages that are used regularly in the society, Javanese and Indonesian. This condition makes me have lack of motivation of using English. I feel difficult when reading English texts, so it makes me frustration.

Thus, my English vocabularies are so limited. Further, I have to struggle to speak and write English. I rarely read journal articles because the language is so complicated for me". (Toyibah)

Different from the previous statement, another student highlights that he tries to pursue himself to read any kind of English text. In this case, he improves his knowledge, grammatical proficiency and English vocabularies through intensive and extensive reading.

"For me, English is an important language. That is why; I have an ambition to master it by thinking out of the box. Even though I come from a poor high school, I enhance myself to read English texts. Further, I subscribe the online English articles such as Jakarta Post, BBC and so on. I also read journal articles that are assigned by my lecturer. In a lazy time, I sometime read English comics. I think academic writing is not easy, so I have to master more English vocabularies". (Fahmi)

#### c. Limited Proficiency in Structure

Grammatical knowledge is a crucial element that needs to be taken into account in improving academic writing skills. Without applying appropriate structures, the content of writing will not be understandable and it will not meet the reader's expectation. In this case, some students of English Department have

difficulty in mastering grammatical knowledge or structure. In addition, they feel confused of how use time in different contexts appropriately. It has been revealed by the student below:

"I sometime have confusion in using appropriate structures in writing such as Present perfect tense, past perfect tense, past continuous and so on. This makes my writing is not understandable. That is why; I have lack interest in writing English because it requires correct grammar in different contexts and topics". (Wafa)

#### d. Limited References

Another crucial element in academic writing is able to access much more references as sources of information. Considering this, students have problems accessing reputable and qualified English articles. Moreover, they have limited English books. Hence, it will be difficult for them to write English due to the lack of upgrading information and knowledge. In addition, the library at campus does not provide sufficient English books and articles. This makes them difficult in accessing some resources in academic writing.

"I think the facilities of library needs improvements especially the collections of English books and articles. Since English Department is categorized a new one, the collection of English books and journal articles is so limited. This makes us rarely come to the library". (Desti)

e. Lack of Motivation

The fundamental factor of hindering in the process of learning academic writing is lack of motivation among the students. Besides, they are not accustomed to thinking critically to the issues of education. This may make them not proficient in academic writing. For this reason, the role of lecturers in academic writing is badly needed to facilitate students and enhance them to be analytical thinkers. Moreover, they are supposed to organize thoughts in acceptable ways in accordance with literacy expectations of the university.

“I think writing is difficult for me. It takes long time for me writing one paragraph in English. Even I have no ideas for writing something. Further, my writing does not meet the correct grammar. I find some errors in writing such as lack of cohesiveness, coherence, and so on. Further, the content of my writing is not meaningful”.  
(Rahma)

Besides the response of students, the lecturer gives her comment about teaching academic writing:

“I have to struggle more when teaching academic writing. Indeed, I strongly pursue my students in writing something English since they have lack of motivation. I encourage them to write their experience in English, gives comment in media social

using English, and so on. Further, I ask them to publish their writing in media social like Blog and instagram. This is one of the ways of motivating them in academic writing”. (Lecturer’s response)

### **Proposed Opportunities for Enhancing the Academic Writing Skills of Students at IAIN Kudus**

Apart from the challenges and problems faced by the students in learning academic writing, lecturers are strongly encouraged to propose a number of opportunities to mitigate the academic writing challenges. These opportunities should therefore consider the following proposed strategies:

- a. Since English Department belongs to a new Department at IAIN Kudus, English lecturers should redesign academic development curricula particularly in academic writing in such a way that they are more responsible to the need of their students. Furthermore, English lecturers are supposed to develop cognitive skills of students by giving them academic literacy, activities of problem solving, and innovation that will attract them to use writing as systems of representation and communication.
- b. Academic writing lecturers should collaborate to other English lecturers especially those who teach Reading in enhancing the academic writing skills of students at IAIN Kudus. In this case, lecturers should initiate to foster intensive academic reading and writing activities which give the students experiences with different writing challenges by exploring critical thinking on academic writing

- exercises. Besides, lecturers should realize their identity as a facilitator focusing on a continuous developmental process through providing the academic culture of reading and writing. Further, using different strategies to increase a warm atmosphere among the students are crucial for lecturers. This can be revealed by recognizing social and learning needs in the process of academic writing teaching (Witteman, 1992, p. 16).
- c. Students are encouraged to sharpen their receptive skills such as listening and reading in order to gain successful productive skills including speaking and writing. Nowadays, some students mostly spend their time using social media as pleasures such as facebook, instagram, whatsapp, twitter, youtube and so forth. Therefore, lecturers need to guide them to use social media for learning English. For example, students are assigned to listen and sing English songs from youtube, students are asked to comment or write something in English on facebook, blog, and so on, and they are recommended to subscribe English news or articles such as BBC, Jakarta Post and so forth.
  - d. Lecturers are actively aware of guiding students in paraphrasing English texts precisely. This can be achieved by giving exercises of writing something using their own language in order to avoid plagiarism. It is so crucial for making the students to be able to critical and responsive in academic writing. Thus, providing English texts from various resources are demanded such as journal articles, newspapers, books, and so on. By giving such exercises of paraphrase, it is expected that students will be motivated to express their ideas in writing.
  - e. Lecturers are expected to pursue their students to apply reference management tools properly in quoting a number of references comprising of books, journal articles, and so forth. Mendeley and Zotero programs are the examples of reference management tools. Reference management, the storage, organization, and use of references, is a crucial element of scholarly communication (Melles & Unsworth, 2015, p. 249). In fact, the roles of reference management tools are so meaningful in the academic writing skills. These include creating a reference list saving and organizing citations, storing and managing research data, organizing files and PDFs, searching library catalogues and inserting bibliographies.
  - f. Lecturers can use technology or digital tools such as instagram, facebook, blog, and so forth to enhance the process of teaching academic writing skills and pursuing them to take part in academic writing workshop and seminar. In order to create the interesting teaching and learning process, social media may be used as an alternative to teach academic writing. For example, students are assigned to write short texts and upload them in blog, facebook and twitter.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, academic writing is one of the crucial skills that need more efforts in acquiring it. A long with it, second language learners

especially students at IAIN Kudus have to struggle in improving their academic writing skills. Indeed, they find various challenges in learning academic writing. These challenges cover students have lack of exposures to English vocabularies, lack of both intensive and extensive reading, limited proficiency in structures, limited references, and lack of motivation. However, some strategies may be proposed for enhancing students in improving their academic writing skills. Lecturers are supposed to actively guide students in the process of teaching academic writing, English lecturers should redesign academic development curricula particularly in academic writing in such a way that they are more responsible to the need of their students,

students are encouraged to sharpen their receptive skills such as listening and reading in order to gain successful productive skills including speaking and writing, students are fostered to apply reference management tools properly in quoting a number of references, lecturers are expected to use digital tools and social media in teaching academic writing and so forth. By promoting these strategies, lecturers hopefully are able to foster themselves in mastering academic writing skills in such a way that they will both contribute and determine the success of their students' academic writing skills. Further, lecturers are demanded to be aware of update information, issues of language teaching and technology in education.

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