EXPLORING STUDENTS’ ABILITY AND PROBLEMS IN WRITING ACADEMIC PAPER

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Abstract: This study portrays the students’ ability and problems of students in writing academic paper especially research proposal and to find out the possible solutions in writing research proposal. The paper will centre around an analysis of students’ ability and difficulties in writing an Introduction chapter. This study conducted in sixth semester students of university of Muhammadiyah mataram in academic year 2013-2014. The study utilized qualitative case study. The data were obtained from document analysis with the students participants. The finding revealed that students ability is in the discourse semantic levels and most students still have problems in achieving the communicative purpose of introduction chapter. In general, the students’ problems were in presenting arguments in terms of justification. Most students have not been able to justify their research area to fill the gap in previous research. The possible solution to solve the difficulties suggest that the students still need guidance, assistance, and explicit teaching in writing the elements and linguistics features of a research proposal to solve their problems in writing a research proposal.

Keywords: students ability and problems, qualitative case study

Introduction
Writing a thesis is central to the success of someone’s learning at all levels, particularly at tertiary level and it is arguably the most important language skill to tertiary students, especially in English major ones, whose grades are largely determined by their performance in written assignment, academic report, term examination and graduation theses (Nga, 2009).

However, based on the researcher observation and experience in supervising undergraduate thesis in the English Department of Muhammadiyah University of Mataram in particular, indicate that most of them students find it difficult to write a thesis. Writing a thesis in English especially for EFL learners like Indonesians is difficult as the students should think not only about the content, the organization of the thesis but also the language.

This condition has led to the researchers’ concern about finding out the students ability and difficulties in writing an English proposal in the research site, where the researcher teach English and supervise students in writing an English thesis.

There is a wide range of research on students abilities and difficulties in writing a thesis especially at tertiary level. First, Jogthong (2001), for instance, analysed of research article introduction written in Thai by Thai academic writers. Second, widiastuti (2010) studied students difficulties in research proposal. This study revealed that some students have been able to write research proposal appropriately. However, there were also some difficulties faced by the students especially in capturing the communicative purposes of all chapter in proposal. Third, abdul –Sadeq Aly (2006) investigated the Egyptian postgraduate students’ difficulties in writing abstract in English. The analysis revealed that the grammatical difficulties were the highest, followed by the educational terminology and technical writing difficulties dan finally lexical difficulties. Fourth, Emilia, Gustin &Rodliyah, (2009) identified students ability and difficulties in writing an English undergraduate thesis. This study found that the students in general can write only the first two elements of the chapter: presenting metatexual information and presenting results. The students in general seem to struggle to write a third move, a cohesive, coherent, analytical and critical discussion element. Fifth, Han (2013) analyse current graduation thesis writing by English majors in independent institute. It is found that a considerable number of students have problem in selection and report of topics, writing of each part and debating in the whole process of graduation thesis.

However, from the previous studies which have been mentioned, only a few studies include analysis of actual written work from the students. The students’ performance in academic writing shows their ability and difficulties in writing, especially for students at tertiary level.

Hence, this present study is designed in order to investigate the students’ ability and difficulties in writing an academic research proposal especially introduction chapter as the first step in producing a graduation thesis. It applied text analysis (to follow Swales, 1990, Swales & Feak, 2009; Paltridge & Stairfield, 1997, 2007; Emilia, 2008, 2009, among others.
Theoretical Framework
In this section, several theories of analysing introduction chapter are discussed covering the purpose, elements and linguistic features of an Introduction chapter.

The Purpose of Introduction Chapter
Introduction chapter is the window to the thesis and will usually be read first by anyone attracted by the title, scanning or browsing through the thesis. This is a chapter that sets out the context and significance of the research questions or issues in a way that a reasonably well-informed reader can understand. It must take the reader through a logical sequence of steps, explaining how the research questions or issues arose and under what circumstances, a beginning exploration of relevant literature, and finishing with an overview of the purpose of each chapter of the thesis (Clare & Hamilton, 2003).

The chapter that the writer makes claims for the centrality or significance of the research in question and begins to outline the overall argument of the thesis (Swales and Feak, 1994)

The Elements of Introduction Chapter
There are three basic elements of an introduction as proposed by theorists (Clare & Hamilton, 2003; Emilia, 2009; Evans & Gruba, 2002; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Swales 1990; Swales & Feak, 2009), i.e. background of the problem, research objectives, and research question.

The organizational structure of the Introduction can be said to move from a fairly general overview of the research terrain to the particular issues under investigation through three key moves which capture the communicative purposes of the Introduction; i.e to establish a research territory, to identify a niche or gap in the territory, to then signal how the topic in question occupies that niche. (Swales and Feak, 1994):

Linguistics Features of Introduction Chapter
(i) Establishing the active voice
Establishing the active ‘voice’ (Belenky et al. 1986, Hertz 1997, Lincoln and Guba 2000 in Clare & Hamilton, 2003) of the writer/researcher who must ‘locate’ themselves in the text (Firestone 1987 in Clare & Hamilton, 2003) is a central purpose of chapter One. The writer constructs a convincing argument to establish the purpose of the research, drawing on knowledge from experience, the literature, and other research. This chapter sets the tone of the thesis and the authority of the author.

(ii) Typical language used in Introduction move structure
As it has been discussed earlier, the organizational structure of the Introduction can be said to move from a fairly general overview of the research terrain to the particular issues under investigation through three key moves which capture the communicative purposes of the Introduction, i.e. to establish a research territory, to identify a niche or gap in the territory, to then signal how the topic in question occupies that niche (Swales and Feak, 1994).

Method
This study used a qualitative case study design (Cohen & Manion, 2004:106), especially text analysis (Travers, 2001:5 and Emilia, 2009:13) in an English study program in Muhammadiyah University of Mataram. Nine students’ research proposal representing different level of achievement – low (Research proposal 1,2,3 with temporary GPA <3, mid (Research proposal 4,5,6 with temporary GPA from 3 to 3.5) and high (Research Proposal 7,8,9 with temporary GPA >3.5).

There were three steps of data analysis. First, analyze the research proposals to get the data on schematic structure and linguistic features employed by the students. Second, compare and contrast the schematic structure and the linguistic features to those proposed by experts (To follow Swales, 1990, Swales and Feak, 2009; Paltridge & Stairfield, 1997, 2007; Emilia, 2008, 2009 and based on the theory of systemic functional grammar, developed by Halliday, 1985, 1994; Hallyday & Mathiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2003, 2007; and Eggins, 2004) to answer the first research question, i.e. to find out the students’ ability and difficulties in their research proposal writing. Third, analyze the data and relate it to the main and other theories to answer the second research question, i.e. to find out possible solution to develop the students’ ability and minimize their difficulties in research proposal writing.

Findings and Discussion
The result from the analysis of all students’ research proposal are discussed below:
Elements of Introduction Chapter

Analysis of the research proposals as a whole suggests that not all students have a good control of the elements or schematic structure of a research proposal, in that the research proposal has all elements required in a research proposal as proposed by the theorists of academic texts (Calabrese, 2006; Clare & Hamilton, 2003; Emerson, 2007; Emilia, 2009; Evans & Gruba, 2002; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005; Hyland, 2004; Oliver, 2004; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007, Swales & Feak, 2009). These elements include: Table of Content, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, References, and Appendixes. There are 2 research proposals (Research proposal 7,9) which do not include table of content.

The analysis of the elements in Introduction are described and discussed in two aspects: (i) the basic elements; (ii) CARS moves.

(i) The basic elements

In terms of the three basic elements in Introduction, the analysis has revealed that almost all students have included the three basic elements in Introduction proposed by theorists (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007, Emilia, 2008). All research proposals also have included the three elements and some students do not include the scope of the study (Research proposal 6 and 9).

(ii) CARS move structure

The analysis has shown that there are sub-moves found in the students’ Introduction. However, many grammatical mistakes were found in their writing. The example of extracts from the students’ writing showing each move can be seen below.

- Move 1a -- Showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way (optional)
  Reading habit supports the students to be able to comprehend the text as well as able to translate the text. (Research proposal 3)

- Move 1b -- Providing background information about the topic (optional)
  Actually, the writer use games in language teaching because games have been long advocated for assisting language learning. Games add interest to what students might not find very interesting. Sustaining interest can mean sustaining effort. (Research proposal 9)

- Move 1c by introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area (obligatory)
  The study about the strategy of teaching reading comprehension has been conducted by Salahudin (2011)....(Research proposal 1)

- Move 1d -- Defining terms (optional)
  CTL is an educational process that aims to help students see meaning in academic subject with the context of their daily lives, that is, with the context of personal, social, and cultural circumstances. (research proposal 6)

- Move 2a
  Overall, from the previous studies have been mentioned, only a few study regarding how students’ reading comprehension relate with their translation. (Research proposal 3)

- Move 2b -- Identifying a problem/need (optional)
  Some research finding indicate that english reading of most indonesian students is still far from being sufficient. In other word they have poor English reading skills (Research proposal 3).

- Move 3a -- Outlining purposes/aims, or stating the nature of the present research or research questions/hypotheses (obligatory)
  Starting from the point of view, the writer is interested in investigating the strategy of teaching narrative text to EFL leaners for the second year students. (Research proposal 1)

- Move 3b -- by announcing principal finding/stating value of researach (optional)
  The writer expects that result of this study can be used to help teachers in order to improve their quality of teaching and learning process in a classroom. It also can help the teachers to measure students’ achievement, give solution to overcome the problem in their learning reading and translation (Research proposal 3)

- Move 3c -- Indicating the structure of the thesis and providing mini-synopses (preview) of each subsequent chapter (obligatory)
  Organization of Writing
  The paper consist of four chapters that are:. This chapter … (Research proposal 6)

To sum up, the result of move analysis has show some sub moves in Introduction found in the students’ Introduction. i.e. Move 1a (Research proposal 3,4,5, 6, 7, 8 and 9); Move 1b (Research proposal 2,3, 4,5,7 and 9); move 1c (Research proposal 1,3,5,7); move 2a (Research proposal 3,7); Move 2b (Research proposal 3,4,5,6,7); Move 3a (Research proposal 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9); move 3b (Reserach proposal 3); Move 3c (Research proposal 6).
On the other hand, some sub moves were not found in the students’ Introduction. The sub moves not included in the students’ Introduction were divided into two criteria, obligatory and optional. The obligatory moves not included by the students were Move 1c (research proposals 2, 4, 6, 8, 9), Move 2a (research proposals 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9), Move 3a (Research proposal 2 and 5), and Move 3c (Research proposal 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9). The optional moves not included by the students were Move 1a (Research proposal 1 and 2), Move 1b (Research proposal 1, 6, 8), Move 1d (Research proposal 9), Move 2b (Research proposal 1, 2, 8, 9), Move 3b (research proposals 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9), Move 3d (All research proposals), and Move 3e (all Research proposal).

Linguistics features of Introduction Chapter

The analysis of the linguistic features in Introduction deals with two aspects: (i) the typical language use in establishing the active ‘voice’ (Belenky et al 1986, Hertz 1997, Lincoln and Guba 2000 in Clare & Hamilton, 2003); (ii) the typical language use in writing the move structure (Swales and Feak, 1994; Paltridge and Starfield, 2007).

(i) The typical language use in establishing the active ‘voice’

Having analyzed the students’ Introduction, it has been found that only two research proposals (Research proposal 3 and 7) which have been establishing the active voice. However, as it has been stated in element analysis, the students still have many grammatical mistakes. The extracts below have shown their authority is dominant in the chapter and that the purpose of the research is clear as proposed by Clare & Hamilton (2003).

Thus study is aimed to find out whether there is significant correlation between students’ reading comprehension and their translating ability. (Research proposal 3)

(ii) The typical language use in writing move structure

Furthermore, in terms of the typical language used in writing move structure, the analysis can be seen below:

In move 1 – establishing a research territory – the writer typically begins to carve out his/her own research space by indicating that the general area is in some way significant. This is often done through reviewing previous research in the field. In addition, the writer may choose to provide background information on particular topic being investigated and may define key terms which are essential for the study. The different moves in the Introduction tend to employ different tenses (Atkinson and Curtis 1998 in Paltridge and Starfield 2007).

The writer believes that is important to investigate the study on student’s correlation in reading and translating because reading is a continuous process of translation. (Research proposal 3)

Move 2 – establishing a niche – points to a ‘gap’ or niche in the previous research which the research will ‘fill’. The language of ‘gap statements’, according to Atkinson and Curtis 1998 in Paltridge and Starfield 2007, is typically evaluative in a negative way.

The typical language of ‘gap statements’ was found in the students’ writing in research proposal 3 and 7. As mentioned in students’ difficulties in writing the elements in CARS move structure, not all students include previous research to indicate a gap (Move 2a). The extracts below show the examples.

(Move 2b)

However, from previous studies have been mentioned, only a few study regarding students’ reading comprehension relate with their translation. (Research proposal 3)

In Move 3 – occupying the niche – the writer, by outlining the purposes of their own research, indicates to the reader how the proposed research will ‘fill’ the identified niche or gap (Move 3a). The extracts below show that the students’ have outlined the purposes of their own research, however as they do not mention previous research to indicate a gap, their proposed research is assumed will not fill the gap.

This study is aimed to find out whether there is significant correlations between students reading comprehension and their translating ability and also the writer hopes that based on this study, will appear new finding to help the writer to finish this thesis. (Research proposal 3)

In a thesis, the principal findings will frequently be previewed and theoretical positions as well as methods used may be outlined. It is here that the writer can signal the value or significance of the research (Move 3b). Move 3b only found in research proposal 3.

The writer expects that result of this study can be used to help teachers in order to improve their quality of teaching and learning process in a classroom. It also can help the teachers to measure students’ achievement, give solution to overcome the problem in their learning reading and translation (Research proposal 3).

Move 3c, in which the overall structure of the thesis is previewed, including a mini-synopsis of each chapter, is considered obligatory. This sub-move (3c) typically contains much metadiscourse. Metadiscourse (also referred to as metatext) refers to discourse about discourse; how writers talk about their writing and the structure of their
writing, when they are not talking about the content of their writing (Bunton 1999; Vande akopple 1985 in Paltridge and Starfield 2007). Metadiscourse in the students’ Introduction is likely to take the form of forward reference to what is still to come and to the overall structure of the research proposal. Examples of metadiscourse found in the students’ research proposal can be seen in the extracts below.

Organization of Writing

The paper consist of four chapters that are: (Research proposal 6)

In short, there are three matters that need to be discussed: the students ability, the students difficulties and the possible solution.First is in line with the students’ ability. In writing a research proposal as a whole, some students have already been able to include all elements required in a research proposal as proposed and the theorists of academic texts. It shows that the students have already had a good control in the discourse semantic level (See Emilia, 2008, 2009). Second, is to do with the students’ difficulties. In writing a research proposal as a whole, some students still have difficulties in including particular elements requires in a research proposal, such as table of content and references. In terms of the basic elements, although almost all students have already been able to include the three basic elements proposed by theorist, there are students who still face difficulty in writing the research question, objective of the study, and the scope of the study. Moreover, in terms of four obligatory moves, only two moves some students have been able to write, i.e. Move 1a and Move 1b, move 2b and move 3a. only a few students write the other two obligatory moves, i.e. Move 1c and 2a. Third is to do with the possible solution to develop the students’ ability and minimize their difficulties. The explicit teaching of all elements and how to write them all in the research proposal is needed to be conducted.

Conclusion

Relevant to the results of the study, it has been found that some students, to some extends, have been able to write the Introduction chapter in their research proposal appropriately. However, there are also some difficulties faced by the students, especially in capturing the communicative purposes of the Introduction by introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area and indicating a gap in the previous research, raising a question on it, or extending previous knowledge. All these suggest that the students still need a lot of guidance and explicit teaching of how to write a research proposal as one genre of academic writing, particularly in writing an Introduction chapter.

References


