

Direct and Indirect Supports in an EFL Academic Writing Classroom: New Rhetorical Genre Perspective¹

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Abstract

Despite the importance of academic writing skills in higher education, many Indonesian students encounter challenges that constrain their writing success. Earlier studies in the context have shown that many students have little control over the schematic structure of the argumentative text and their linguistics features. In the current paper, we aimed to document a classroom practice where direct and indirect supports were given to the students during the course of academic writing at an English Education program in a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. From our reflection on the practice, students benefited from the two supports given to them in each stage of a writing activity. Students were shown to have sufficient knowledge about the academic literature, how to search journal articles, and how to comprehend and annotate the articles' contents. Despite the students' positive feedback, we found that the average students' writings were not satisfactory. While students had sufficient knowledge to select and use appropriate academic words, there appeared substantial issues concerning the development of ideas and arguments to support the idea. We observed that students had limited time to practice, and this inhibited them from producing a good academic essay. The academic writing course syllabus and its timetable thus should be revisited to address such issues.

Resumen

A pesar de la importancia de las habilidades de escritura académica en la educación superior, muchos estudiantes indonesios enfrentan desafíos que limitan su éxito en la escritura. Estudios anteriores en el mismo contexto han demostrado que muchos estudiantes tienen poco control sobre la estructura esquemática del texto argumentativo y sus características lingüísticas. En el artículo actual, nuestro objetivo era documentar una práctica en el aula donde se brindaba apoyo directo e indirecto a los estudiantes durante el curso de redacción académica en un programa de educación en inglés en una universidad privada en Yakarta, Indonesia. A partir de nuestra reflexión sobre la práctica, los alumnos se beneficiaron de los dos apoyos que se les brindaron en cada etapa de una actividad de escritura. Se demostró que los estudiantes tenían suficiente conocimiento sobre la literatura académica, cómo buscar artículos de revistas y cómo comprender y comentar el contenido de los artículos. A pesar de la retroalimentación positiva de los estudiantes, encontramos que los escritos de los estudiantes promedio no eran satisfactorios. Si bien los estudiantes tenían suficiente conocimiento para seleccionar y usar palabras académicas apropiadas, aparecieron problemas sustanciales relacionados con el desarrollo de ideas y argumentos para apoyar la idea. Observamos que los estudiantes tenían poco tiempo para practicar y esto les impedía producir un buen ensayo académico. El programa del curso de redacción académica y su calendario, por lo tanto, deben revisarse para abordar estos problemas.

Introduction

Academic writing skills have been seen as one of the requirements for success in higher education studies. Many universities have developed a writing curriculum to help students shape their academic writing ability. Unfortunately, many literature works, such as Lillis and Turner, 2001, have revealed concerns regarding students' inability to write essays in a way that the academy requires. These researchers have identified several challenges that students encounter, including confusion regarding the conventions of academic writing, wording, arguments, and structures besides linguistics issues. Particularly, Indonesian students studying in an institution with English as a medium of instruction have more English academic writing problems. This is due to the nature of academic writing that is culturally different in two languages (Arsyad & Arono, 2016); in the case of the current paper the two languages involved are English and Bahasa Indonesia). A study by Antara et al. (2016) has suggested that many Indonesian university students have insufficient knowledge and competence in some writing aspects such as the argumentative writing style, grammar and spelling. Another study by Aunurrahman et al. (2017) has found that the students have little control over the organisation and linguistic features of an argumentative text. Additionally, the findings of Husin and Nurbayani's (2017) study emphasise students' inability to develop an argumentative text with acceptable text structure.

In the current paper, we aim to document a classroom practice where direct and indirect supports were given to the students during the course of academic writing at an English Education program in a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The two supports were purposefully provided to the students to understand

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and comprehend the social actions and function of genre in academic contexts (Hyon, 1996). The following literature review section will discuss the new rhetoric genre and explain in more detail the implicit and explicit writing instructional approach of the current practice. The method section will give detail about the context and the student participants. The section also describes the classroom procedure that the authors carried out in the current practice.

Literature review

The new rhetorical genre approach

Our classroom practice adopted the rhetorical genre approach to writing instruction. Particularly, we applied the genre perspective, which the new rhetoric scholars have offered. Genre in the new rhetoric perspective is perceived as situation action emphasising the value of context and social contexts of the occurring genre (Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 1996; Li & Hu, 2016). The social actions and knowledge about genre were developed in reference to particular settings and were acquired through participation in dynamic and authentic communication contexts (Li & Hu, 2016, p. 3). In a pedagogical context, the rhetorical situations of the genre are presented in texts, authors, audiences, and social settings (Paré, 2014).

In line with the new rhetorical genre studies tradition, our classroom practice particularly aimed to help university students understand the social actions as well as functions of genre in academic contexts (Hyon, 1996). Students' success in the current writing course is reflected through their sufficient ability to read and write academic writings (Hyon, 1996). To this end, the importance of genre function and the social contexts were taken as the focus of the classroom writing instruction (Miller, 1994). More importantly, we provided clear descriptions of the students' writing assignments (Li & Hu, 2016). We exercised two instructional approaches offered by Li and Hu (2016): explicit and implicit teaching approaches to genre expectations (Li & Hu, 2016).

In the explicit writing instruction, teachers are supposed to provide clear information about what is expected from students' writing. Li and Hu (2016) urge teachers to present their students with genre expectations on their writing assignments "through assignment sheets, course documents and model texts" (p. 3). Coe (1994 cited in Hyon, 1996) also suggests that teachers should enable the students to identify the features of rhetorical situations, including the purpose, audience and specific contexts of the text. Students' writings then were evaluated in reference to how well it addresses the conditions.

Some empirical evidence suggests that teachers' explicit rhetorical teaching benefits students' second language reading comprehension and helped develop their writing ability (Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 1996). The other implicit writing instruction provides students with an opportunity to immerse themselves into particular target social situations, through lectures, classroom discussion, reading and writing assignment (Li & Hu, 2016; Soliday, 2005). As Soliday (2005) argues, student writers' success primarily relies on their ability to adapt a genre by interpreting the genre features rather than copying particular forms of the genre.

Supporting students in the writing assignment

As discussed earlier, the implicit and explicit writing instructional approach was adopted in our practice. These instructional approaches were exercised to address the academic literacy issue, reducing the gap between teachers' expectations on their students' writing assignment (The New London Group, 1996). In the academic writing classroom context, Li and Hu (2016) suggest the direct and indirect writing supports to promote the explicit and implicit practices of the genre instructional approach in the new rhetorical genre tradition. The direct and indirect approaches to writing are presented in the figure below:

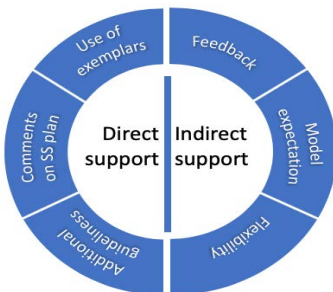


Figure 1: Direct and indirect supports. Adapted from Li and Hu (2016).

The two direct and indirect supports are designed to incorporate the genre expectation into the writing assignment requirements. In the writing classroom, the two writing supports are exercised by giving additional guidelines, providing comments on students' assignment plans and using exemplars from previous writing assignment papers. Li and Hu (2016) demonstrate that teachers can give students notes and suggestions regarding the final writing assignment's structure and format. Teachers can also ask their students to submit the outline of their writing and give feedback. Moreover, as Li and Hu (2016) argue, using students' writing assignments from the previous year and the assessment rubrics may benefit the current students to obtain real and tangible pictures of what they are expected to accomplish.

Methods

Classroom contexts and the students

Our classroom practice took place in an academic writing course at the English education department in an Indonesian private university in the academic year 2019-2020. Academic writing was a four-credit course, comprised of 14 weeks with 200 minutes of instruction time per week. In addition to the classroom session, students were required to attend additional online sessions of 4-6 hours per week for self-study and reading assignments. Thirty-nine students attending the academic writing course participated in the study. The students were both female (N = 35) and male (N=4), aged between 21 and 23. The participating students had English proficiency levels ranging between intermediate and upper intermediate level or with IELTS scores between 4.0 – 6.50. Students with these levels of English proficiency are considered able to use English in a particular work environment; although they might find it difficult to use English to communicate ideas beyond their field.

Classroom procedure

Our classroom practice was situated in an academic course where students were required to produce a 1000–1500 word academic essay for their final assignment. The fourteen weeks of class are described in the following procedure and activities:

During Weeks 1 and 2, the learning activities introduced the students to the objective of the course, classroom activities, assignments and the assessment criteria. This introduction provided students with an overview of the academic course and the activities they would have. Students were also taught about the nature and characteristics of academic text using exemplars from journal articles. It was expected that students could understand academic writing characteristics, and accordingly prepare themselves for learning. More importantly, the assessment criteria provided information about the writing quality standard as they represent the expected outcome of students' learning (Elander et al., 2006).

In the classroom, we informed the students about the final writing assignments, as below:

Final writing assignment

Genre: Academic writing
Length: 1000 - 1500 words

Instructions:

In this final examination, you are asked to develop a 1000 - 1500 word essay describing the background of your mini-research topic. Apply the moves that we have learned in the previous lessons.

Requirement:

To complete the final assignment, you need to submit the annotated bibliography of five papers from the reading activity in Week 3-5.

Assessment rubric:

1. Communicative quality
2. Linguistics accuracy
3. Organisation
4. Argumentation
5. Interestingness
6. Referencing (Hamp-Lyons & Henning, 1991)

The other lecture was also carried out during Weeks 8-9, aiming to provide the students with knowledge about rhetorical moves of academic literature, particularly one that is proposed by Arsyad and Arono (2016). Examples from Indonesian scholars published in well-recognised journals were used as model texts. Some

writing assignments from some students from the previous year were also presented at this stage to give them examples of the writing they should produce.

The reading activity was provided during Weeks 3-5. During the activity, students were asked to comprehend particular academic literature and write an annotated bibliography from the literature. We provided an annotation model and worksheet to help students develop their own annotation. It is worth noting that students were given more opportunities to select specific literature that catch their interests.

Weeks 6-7 were designed for students' seminars, where students presented their reading and writing plan. Here, students received comments from the instructor (the first author) and their peers regarding their writing plan.

The writing cycle (outlining - drafting - editing and revising) and conference were carried out during Weeks 10-14. In this cycle, the instructor could read students' writing, obtain the students' intended meaning in the writing, and accordingly the instructor can provide feedback and guidance for students' revision (Eckstein, 2013). The students could take the benefits from the writing conference for they could express their intention and negotiate with the teacher. Previous studies have provided empirical evidence about the values of L2 writing tutorials on students' writing development (see more discussion about these concepts in Eckstein, 2013).

Findings and Reflection

After the writing course ended, we invited the students to an interview. Student participation in the interview was voluntary and, of the 39 students, eight students responded to invitation. Prior to the interview, students were informed that their participation would not affect their score. Soon after their consent was collected, we started the interview. The interview with the student participants was aimed at exploring their perception about the overall writing process. The interview lasted for about ten minutes for each student. Our reflection was developed in reference to the interview.

We obtained positive feedback from the students regarding the direct and indirect supports we had given them during the academic writing course. The students had sufficient knowledge about academic literature, how to search for journal articles, and how to comprehend and annotate the articles' contents. It is worth considering that the students had different strategies for finding relevant writing resources as well as references for their writing topic. Some students felt that they should find the topic first, prior to the journal search, while others preferred to search for the journal articles at the early stage to enable them to develop the writing topic.

Students also felt that the two supports had helped them comprehend the learning materials and search for relevant writing resources. While some students were observed to have found their writing focus, we identified a few students who still struggled to develop their writing plan. This was because the students were too reluctant to consult with their instructors about their writing progress. Many students also felt that they did not receive sufficient attention or support from the instructors. We assumed that the presence of social gaps might be the source of students' reluctance. An earlier study by Mulyono et al. (2019) has indicated social gaps between teachers and students both inside and outside the classroom. They believe that many Indonesian EFL students perceive teachers at a higher social status and thus they are required to respect them. Age differences and gaps in social roles have been shown to influence the way students interact and act towards their teachers (Mulyono et al., 2019).

From the literature (e.g., AbuSeileek & Abualsha'r, 2014; Swain et al., 2002), we also discovered that some students seemed to learn better from their peers. We observed that some students had formed a work group to seek for help from their peers in order to complete their writing assignment. The use of the native Bahasa Indonesia to facilitate revision and the availability of assistance from more capable students during the group work were shown to help the less capable students to achieve particular writing goals. Such a supportive environment from the peers confirms the value of group work, particularly the social-cognitive roles and mediating strategies during peer-revision in a foreign language learning context as suggested earlier by Villamil and de Guerrero (1996).

Despite the students' positive feedback, we found that the average students' writings were not satisfactory. While students had sufficient knowledge to select and use appropriate academic words, there appeared substantial issues concerning the development of ideas and their arguments to support the idea. Such an issue might be due to students' lack of reading and students' inability to construct the sentences, connect ideas between sentences, and connect ideas between paragraphs. From our interview with the students, it

was revealed that students had misconceptions about academic writing in general. It is interesting, but not surprising, that students perceived the importance of writing merely concerned with spelling, grammar and sentence structure. Specifically during the revision stage, a study by Villamil and de Guerrero (1998) has shown that students placed their focus predominantly on grammar in persuasive writing tasks. Other studies, e.g., Beason (1993) and Yagelski (1995) provide similar findings, revealing that students focus more on surface level revisions and stylistic concerns.

We have learned that students were likely incapable of applying the knowledge they have obtained during the course into their academic writing process. Particularly, students seemed to require more time to undergo their writing activities. More crucially, intensive supervision and guidance should be available during the activity.

Conclusions

In the current paper, we have described the application of two writing supports (i.e., direct and indirect supports) during an academic writing course at the English education department in an Indonesian private university. The two supports enabled the students to gain sufficient knowledge related to the academic writing and find relevant writing resources. Students were shown to have sufficient knowledge about the academic literature, how to search for journal articles, and how to comprehend and annotate the articles' contents. However, the given writing supports and the academic writing knowledge that students had comprehended did not seem to improve their writing competence.

Our current practice has identified several technical issues that students encountered, including their inability to develop ideas and support their arguments. In addition, students still had difficulties in constructing sentences, connecting between ideas, and organising the academic texts. Limited practice time and lack of intensive supervision and guidance were shown to be three factors that kept students from producing a good academic text. Moreover, students' reluctance to consult their writing progress with their classroom instructor also hindered their receiving sufficient feedback on their writing.

The implication of the current writing classroom practice includes the call to revisit the university's academic course syllabus and its timetable in order to address the writing issues encountered by the students. In addition, the peer-learning and feedback should be encouraged during the writing activity and students should be given a sufficient amount of time to undergo their writing activities and be supported by an intensive supervision and guidance.

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