

EXPLORING STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING UNDERGRADUATE THESIS AND THE FACTORS OF THE DIFFICULTIES

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Abstract: Academic writing has significant role in higher education as contribution to the largest sources of scientific information. A thesis is one of the most important task to undergraduate students to finish their education program and contribute their knowledge. However, writing an undergraduate thesis tend to be challenging task, as it requires a good understanding of the topic and good writing skills. Therefore, the researcher aims to focus on researching the difficulties in undergraduate thesis and the factors of the difficulties using descriptive qualitative research design involving 5 students undergoing the task of writing undergraduate thesis as the research participants. The study implemented using interview guide adapted from Cheung (2013) consisting of six questions. The data collected using the semi-structured interview through WhatsApp voice note due to social distancing protocol in the midst of COVID-19. The data analyzed by using qualitative data analysis based on Creswell (2009) which includes data selection, grouping, and organization, generating a description, discussion and drawing conclusion. The result of the study reveals that the student encounters several problems including difficulties in qualitative data analysis caused by lack of information and course about qualitative data analysis, finding relevant literatures caused by lack of availability of related literature, laziness due to revision and different perspective between the advisors, as well as difficulties in specific chapter. In terms of non-linguistic difficulties, the students mostly struggle in content organization, while, linguistic problems occurs in the writing process includes lexical and structure problem but it's proven to be less problematic.

Key Words: : *Academic writing, difficulties, undergraduate thesis.*

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing have a significant role in higher education as one of the largest sources of scientific information that every student at higher education has to complete as their scientific contribution that shows academic dedication and

quality. According to Oshima and Hogue (2007), academic writing is formal, so the writer should take care to write complete sentences and organize them in a certain way. These qualities are altogether integrated into a writing style that is suitable for the reader and a certain context. As stated by Dwihandini (2013) that thesis writing is about reporting research that has been done by following a special and organized format of a research report. Therefore, it can be said that writing a good thesis requires decent knowledge both in the organization of ideas and the basics of academic writing. Moreover, Al-Badi (2015) asserted that scientific writing is the coherent arrangement of written phrases inside paragraphs as a reflection of the writer's ideas that is comprehensible not only for the certain individual but also understandable from the perspective of society. Mubarak (2017) added that academic or scientific writing represents structured research done and used by higher education scholars. Additionally, Hayland (2002) stated that "Academic writing is not just about conveying an ideational 'content'; it is also about the representation of self.

There are various kinds of academic writing ranging from simple short article, essay, and report to more complex such as thesis and dissertation. In the case of undergraduate university students, a thesis is one of the most important as the final assignment to finish their education program and contribute their knowledge and dedication to science and knowledge development. A thesis is a piece of writing that gives information about the result of a particular topic that written scientifically as academic writing (Puspita 2019). As stated by Hidayat (2020), thesis writing is a very important and essential skill for the undergraduate scholar to enhance their career and experience further. However, writing a thesis appears to be a challenging task for university students, as it requires a good understanding of the topic and good writing skills.

However, writing a thesis appears to be a challenging task for university students, as it requires a good understanding of the topic and good writing skills. According to Al-Khairiy (2013), major problems in academic writing comprise inappropriate use of vocabulary, grammatical errors, irregular verbs, punctuation, and spelling. This task is even more challenging for those who write using a

foreign language. Chou (2011) stated that other causes of difficulties in scientific writing include L1 distraction, insufficiency of ideas, and imprecise work directions. Furthermore, Mubarak (2017) pointed that the difficulties in English academic writing seem to be a common case of EFL learners as they have to be acquainted with the writing process, components, and elements such as a convention, objective to utilize the language precisely and accurately in a foreign language.

Several studies reported a variety of difficulties related to academic writing in a foreign language. Moreover, a study conducted by Cheung (2013) indicated that most problems are caused by language-related difficulties such as inappropriate stance, grammar, and choice of words. In terms of lacking knowledge in academic writing, Al Mukdad (2019) revealed that students' difficulties in academic writing are caused by a lack of knowledge to distinguish between academic and common type English writing. Furthermore, a study conducted by Belkhir & Benyelles (2017) shows that EFL learners have difficulties regarding coherence and cohesion in academic writing due to the lack of reading, insufficient language transfer and practice in writing. Moreover, Sariyanto (2020) found that difficulties of writing an undergraduate thesis are caused by a lack of knowledge about thesis components, the process of consultation, psychological factors, and economic factors. Another study by Nasser (2019) also reveals that low English proficiency might also hinder academic writing, students' errors related to difficulties in the use of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting diagnosed from Iraqi EFL students' writing composition. More recent study by Lestari (2020) revealed that the students' difficulties in writing a thesis are related to English proficiencies; time management; deciding research methodology, attitude, and the difficulties due to co-advisor relationship.

This study takes into consideration the gap found in previous studies. The researcher found that the previous studies (e.g. Cheung, 2013; Al Mukdad, 2019; Nasser, 2019 and Belkir & Benyelles 2017) mainly focus in analyzing the students' perception towards issues in simple academic writing such as essays and

reports. And some is found to be conducted using close-ended questions that might limit students to express difficulties they encounter directly. There are studies that focuses on the undergraduate thesis, for instance, Lestari; and Sariyanto et al (2020) but uses questionnaire and Likert scale that might not cover the students' real experience. Moreover, none of them conduct the study to find the factors causing the difficulties of thesis writing. In this case, the current study focuses on researching the difficulties in undergraduate thesis and the factors of the difficulties descriptively.

METHOD

This study implemented descriptive qualitative research design by analyzing factual field phenomenon to answer the research questions. The reason of using qualitative design is to understand about students' difficulties in the writing of undergraduate thesis and the factors causing the difficulties in narrower, deeper and more detailed analysis. The study focused on 5 participants undergoing final assignment to write English undergraduate thesis. The participants taken from English Department at the University of Islam Malang from any late semester students undergoing thesis study. The researcher chose 5 participants with different supervisors to gain more diverse data in terms of supervision. Furthermore, the researcher also makes sure that the students have finished chapter five so the researcher gathered information about the participants' difficulties and causing factors in all chapter of undergraduate thesis.

In this research, the data were taken by using semi-structured interviews about students' difficulties in writing an undergraduate thesis in English based on their experience. The interview question is adapted from Cheung (2013) that consisted of six questions. Items one to three contains a question about difficulties that is recognized by the respondents, and item four contains mentions specific thesis difficulties to gain information about difficulties that the respondents might not mention. Item number one intended to discover students' weakness in writing thesis, and number two specifies it in particular chapter of the thesis. Item number

three focused on specific difficulties, for instance, point 'a' to 'd' focused on linguistic difficulties and point 'e' and 'f' focused on linguistic difficulties. Items number one to four is intended to answer the first research question. Item number five and six contains questions to discover factors causing undergraduate thesis difficulties to answer the second research question. The interviews are conducted using a WhatsApp voice note due to social distancing protocol in the midst of COVID-19. The researcher contacted and made agreement with fellow students undergoing thesis writing to participate in the study as the interviewee. The first data collection has been done for about one week then the second data collection has been done after the researcher analyzed the first interview responses and found some of the responses are not sufficient for the study, which took three days to complete.

To answers, the research questions, the researcher analyzes the data by using qualitative data analysis based on Creswell (2009) which organizes raw data into organized meaningful whole conclusion. According to Creswell (2009), there are six steps required for the researcher to analyze at the meaning of field data efficiently. There are steps to follow in data analysis, the first process is an organization of data, this process involves preparing the data for the analysis in an organized way such as data selection, grouping, and labeling. For this study, data organization taken from the result of the interview in the form of transcripts and grouping the transcript according to the difficulties of writing an undergraduate thesis. The second step is generating a description of data or data interpretation, after the data is organized, the researcher includes a description of each data for the research to be more comprehensible. Description generation is to present accurate representation and explanation of the information in detail to support data presentation.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the researcher divided the findings based on the research question, the first analysis is about difficulties in writing undergraduate thesis, and the second analysis is about factors causing those difficulties.

4.1.1 Difficulties in Writing Undergraduate Thesis

In analyzing the difficulties of writing undergraduate thesis, the researcher found several difficulties encountered by students. From the interview, the researcher found that there are four students who have difficulties in particular chapter except participant three. The overall data is shown in the following table.

Problems in particular chapter	Participants				
	1	2	3	4	5
Chapter 1: Introduction				✓	✓
Chapter 2: Review of related literature	✓				✓
Chapter 3: Research method		✓		✓	✓
Chapter 4: Findings and discussion	✓	✓			✓
Chapter 5: Conclusion and suggestion					✓
Reference					✓

From the table above, it is found that the most frequent difficulties faced by students are in chapter three and four that encountered by three of the students, then followed by chapter one and two, that mentioned by two students and followed by chapter five and reference that only mentioned by one student. In terms of difficulties in writing undergraduate thesis, the researcher found four difficulties, one of those is the problem of finding relevant articles. The cause of this problem is due to lack of availability of related studies in the same qualitative setting with the student.

This finding suggest that the students are struggling to find specific information that suits the student's research, as related title doesn't guarantee similar focus of the research. For instance, Badenhorst (2018) found that in writing literature review, the students are still shifting from university students to research students and advance from knowledge telling as the basis in generic framework of writing to knowledge transformation which literature review requires. Badenhorst (2018) further explains that the students require several reviews of literature to fits the theme of their arguments and later to fit with their findings as the research progresses. Moreover, the result of this study supported

by the findings of Walter (2020) who found participants' difficulties on literature review are caused by the unique theme expressively stated by the participant, which result in the difficulties to manage large quantity of information in literature review to fits with specific theme.

In regards to difficulties from particular chapter, the result indicated that the most frequent difficulties faced by students are in chapter three and four. The finding is in line with the study of Irwandi (2021) who found that students' difficulties in academic writing is caused by lack of understanding in research method as well as the finding by Heracleous (2019) which shows that most novice researchers are struggling in the integration of findings with related literatures.

In regards to the more specified difficulties regarding linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties, the researcher analyzed difficulties in writing process of undergraduate thesis by focusing on difficulties several aspects, those are understanding of each chapter of undergraduate thesis, taking decision in writing content, content organization, structure, and lexical difficulties. This finding is in line with the statement of Walter (2020) that students often having difficulties regarding the method of managing large amount of information from various related literatures including summarizing and synthesizing which is essential for writing in scientific setting. In terms of lexical problems, this study reveals that most of the students encounter this difficulty, but they seems to ignore the grammar error and correct it later using Grammarly or wait for the lecturer feedback to revise it. This is in line with Fitriyah (2021) who implies that most students have difficulties in structure or written aspects when they write English academic writing papers, and they solve those challenges by learning from an example of good academic writing or utilizing automated grammar correction application such as Grammarly.

4.1.4 Factors Causing Difficulties in Writing Undergraduate Thesis

The researcher analyzes the factors causing difficulties in two aspects. The first one focused on difficulties in writing undergraduate thesis that already mentioned by students and the other focused to identify if there are any external factors such as relation with lecturers, or psychological factors that affect those difficulties. The data are presented as follows:

What factors caused the difficulties in writing undergraduate thesis?		
Participant	Problems	Factors
1	Finding relevant materials	1. There are few studies related to the topic in participant's research 2. Relating the findings and discussion with previous studies
2	Coding and analyzing qualitative data	1. There is no class discussing qualitative analysis. 2. Lack of understanding about coding
3	Laziness due to a lot of revision	• Lack of clue on feedback given by the advisor on how to revise
4	Having dilemma due to different opinion between two advisors	1. Advisors have different opinion 2. Advisor 2 also take part in content writing which is the job of advisor 1
5	Analyzing qualitative data, how to analyze interview.	1. Lack of information regarding how to analyze qualitative data.

In overall, external factors encountered by students are varied, ranging from disturbance between priority and friends, difficulties in supervision, dilemma and having no friends to work together with. It informs that most external factors are caused by either friends and the advisors. In terms of difficulties in analyzing qualitative data, the result shows that there are two students encountered this problem, one student stated the problem about coding qualitative data, and the other mentioned having difficulties in the process of qualitative data analysis. In terms of difficulties in coding, Heracleous (2019) stated that coding requires the researcher to be sensible of interpreting robustness of their data in systematic enquiry analysis, the study also reveals that novice researcher finds it difficult in coding to theme up their findings with the existing theory. Similar result is found in the study by Elliot (2018) that identified challenges in coding especially when the researcher tried to convert the novelty of their contribution in thematic analysis in repeated patterns.

In regards to the difficulties in analyzing qualitative data, the result also shows that the causing factor of the difficulties in analyzing qualitative data are somewhat similar between two students, this is due lack of understanding and information during their study about analyzing qualitative data. As stated by Belotto (2018) that the challenges in qualitative research involves phenomenon-driven research that shifts in focus as the research progresses to explains a contemporary real-life social phenomenon as well as identifying theories that can explain those phenomenon, this turns out to be problematic especially for those who are new to scientific writing. This result has similarities with the study of Lestari (2020), that indicated undergraduate's difficulties in data analysis due to lack of understanding in academic writing. Moreover, Fauziah (2021) also found that academic difficulties are triggered by problems of adjusting research topics to the current situation, lack of understanding of research methods and academic writing styles.

In regards to the student's laziness because of seeing a lot of revision, the researcher found that the problem is caused by lack of supervision, which in this particular study, the student mentioned that the advisor only shows what should be revised and did not include the clue about how to revise.

What external factors causing difficulties in writing undergraduate thesis?		
Participant	Problems	Factors
1	The slow progress of the thesis	There are few studies related to the topic in participant's research Relating the findings and discussion with previous studies
2	The slow progress of the revision	The advisor hard to meet and take a long time to give feedback.
3	No external factors	None
4	Having dilemma about advisors' different opinion.	Have anxiety to communicate with both advisors about the different opinion.
5	Analyzing qualitative data, how to analyze interview.	No friends to ask or working with writing thesis together.

The data shows that there are several external factors encountered by the students. In regards to external factors causing difficulties in writing undergraduate thesis, the researcher indicated that most external factors are caused by either friends and the advisors. This is in line with the study conducted by Fauziah (2021) which indicates several non-academic problems including

laziness, burnout, anxiety, lacking social relationship and motivation as well as readiness that prevents them to complete their task in time. Moreover, about supervision, the result is in line with Roberts and Seaman (2018) who stated that challenges in supervision encompasses lack of clarity and inconsistencies, perceived power imbalances between students and supervisors, and perceived inequities in the amount of supervision provided across students.

For instance, the students finds that uncontrolled social interaction with friends might slow down the progress of undergraduate thesis, and lack of interaction with the lecturer also cause the slow progress in revision. The result of this study is in line with the study by Roberts and Seaman (2018), who found difficulties in supervision related to lack of clarity and sometimes inequities in the amount of supervision provided across students. Also, similar issues with current study reported in the study by Lestari (2020) who found some students tend to postpone their thesis due to difficulties in supervision because the lecturer keep saying “it is still wrong” without giving slightest clue about it.

The result also shows the difficulties caused by different opinion from two advisors regarding to the newness of source that the student cited in the writing. The student believed that this particular problem is caused by two advisors supervision system and the two of them have different perspective and standard. This result related with the study of Roberts and Seaman (2018) that students’ difficulties in supervision are related to inconsistencies between supervision and perceived power imbalances between students and supervisors. The way how it is related is about inconsistencies, from this study, the student is supervised by two lecturer who have different opinion while in Roberts and Seaman’s (2018) study only involves one supervisor but have inconsistent feedback. Another similarity is about perceived power inequalities between students and supervisors which result the students have no choice but to follow the inconsistent feedback, and this study also revealed that the student is having difficulties to communicate with the lecturer regarding the different perspective of other lecturer.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The result of the study reveals that the student encounters several problems including difficulties in qualitative data analysis caused by lack of information and course about qualitative data analysis, finding relevant literatures caused by lack of availability of related literature, laziness due to revision and different perspective between the advisors, as well as difficulties in specific chapter. In terms of non-linguistic difficulties, the students mostly struggle in content organization, while, linguistic problems occurs in the writing process includes lexical and structure problem but it's proven to be less problematic. The study suggests the students to learn more information about scientific writing such as undergraduate thesis from various sources and not rely too much on one source of learning or wait to be provided with information. It also suggested for the lecturers to provide more attention on what the students need in undergraduate thesis to be better at guiding students in writing undergraduate thesis. For the next researcher, it is suggested to conduct further research regarding other aspects that is not included in this study such as time completion, relationship with the lecturers and supervision in online setting.

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