

An Indonesian EFL Learner's Dissertation Writing: Some Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

A dissertation is said to be an academician's peak of academic achievement. One can demonstrate his expertise, passion in a particular field of study, and skills through his dissertation. Yet, in general, writing a dissertation may not be simple for every graduate student, especially when he has to write a dissertation about language in a language that is not his native language, English for instance, indicating that he must be able to show remarkable capabilities in manipulating the language. To find out about how a non-English speaking student coped with any problems persisted during the process of writing his dissertation in English I conducted a brief interview with an Indonesian lecturer, majoring in Linguistics, who wrote his dissertation in English. The interview presented some important fact in relation to successfully producing a qualified dissertation, i.e. mastery of one's field of study, and the English academic writing skills.

Keywords:

Dissertation writing, academic writing, linguistics

1. Introduction

Writing in academic English to a native-speaker standard may impose heavy burdens for many students (Chang and Strauss 2010; Buckingham 2008). Even those who have spent many years learning English as either a second, let alone a foreign language, can face tough challenges when it comes to producing academic written works. They may face unexpected hindrances, which do not have to correlate with their intelligence, but with culture and previous educational system, for example (Andrade 2006, p.138; Chang and Strauss 2010). Those problems can significantly affect their academic achievement that some institutions find it very important to conduct intensive courses on thesis and dissertation writing (Manalo 2006). I recalled my own experience and my friends' when we had to write our master thesis around four years ago. We were faced with not only unfamiliarity with researching (about English) but also lack of English academic writing skills.

Certainly, there were certainly other non-academic factors such as time constraint as most of us were full-time employees, health, family or even financial problems. That's why rarely could we complete our thesis in less than a year; we needed at least a year, some of us even had to spend two or three years. Thus, it is of my interest then to study whether the same problem arises for EFL students writing their dissertations, bearing in mind that a doctoral study is the highest level of study. Had there been any problems, I wonder how a doctoral student would have dealt with them. Thus, the purpose of my small research is to briefly analyze some basic problems a non-English post-graduate student had when writing a dissertation in English.

2. Review of Related Literature

Andrade (2006) conducted a study on the factors that influence the adjustment that the international students had to make to their English language proficiency and culture. She examined empirical research articles related to the adjustment and academic achievement of international students conducted, the research of which were conducted from 1996 to 2005 and published in internationally reputable databases such as ERIC, Education Full Text, ProQuest, and Search Premier. From the articles, she highlighted several important points that were related to the adjustments both students and professors had to make to achieve academic success, which included English skills: listening (e.g. problems in understanding the meanings due to different accents, idioms, and even examples used by the teachers), writing directly, speaking (e.g. participating fully in classroom discussions, expressing opinions, posing questions) and reading comprehension; social relationship with domestic students, different cultures: individual vs. collective living, for instance; affective factors like the feelings of loneliness and homesickness, and even the teachers' perception toward the international students in that the former viewed the latter as having low English proficiency, critical thinking skills, and no interest in collaborative work with their classmates. All of the previously mentioned factors had some contribution to various extents to the international students' academic achievement. However, Andrade also reported that only those international students who realized their

problems, and were able to reflect their own weaknesses in adjusting themselves to the foreign system of learning, would be able to reach their goals of learning in foreign countries. Those kind of students could even provide and work out solutions to their own problems, such as exposing themselves to textbooks as well gradually making friends with the domestic students, and establishing good communications with their teachers to minimize the cultural barriers, and giving suggestions to their institutions concerning necessary issues related to classroom teaching and learning.

Manalo (2006) conducted a study on an English preparation intensive course for students who would write a thesis or dissertation in the following year. He reported that the rationale of the course was to expose students with all the important particular writing skills: thesis or dissertation writing. The course, which consisted of instructions, presentations, and exercises, offered a series of plans which reflected the process one has to go through when writing his/her thesis or dissertation. Thus, those attending the course would learn how to write thesis proposals, choose and refine thesis topic, design research, generate ideas through reading, structuring a thesis, organize ideas, review the literature, think critically, take advantage of a computer, draft, redraft, edit, and proofread their works, and even to present their work in a seminar. Hence, students taking the course noted that it was beneficial for them, at least in equipping them with necessary academic writing skills relevant to their thesis or dissertation production. In addition, most of the participants reported successful completion of their theses.

Buckingham (2008) studied the learning strategies of the second-language writing skills of 13 Turkish scholars in a Turkish university by means of personal interviews. The research showed that it was the genre conventions that became the primary acquisition of the learners, with self-directed analysis of linguistic and organizational norms to be the sub issues. Thus, the purpose of the study was to find methods to incorporate the learning of the writing skills into a field study or portfolio-based academic writing program in which participants had learn and familiarize themselves to the convention of academic writing according to the genre of their field of study. The interviewees highlighted several important

points. First, academic writing was not easy even for those who had learned English in their previous bilingual schools. Some of the problems included vocabularies, and elaborative and argumentative styles. Therefore, they had to work several times harder in contrast with their English-native classmates. The second problem was the difference between a dissertation and article writing. While the former should be as comprehensive as possible, the second should focus on particular issues only. The third problem was the English tone, complex structures and idioms that were characteristics of journal articles.

Chang and Strauss (2010) investigated the relationships between Chinese-speaking international students and their supervisors, specifically in terms of the effect of the relationship to the students' thesis writing, and the language support offered by the supervisors. They distributed 51 questionnaires, and conducted interviews to 6 students who were willing to participate in the study. The study found that the Chinese-speaking students admitted that critical thinking may not be problematic for them as they were accustomed to its practice in their homeland. It was the medium to express their ideas critically in the English language that was their major difficulty, which unfortunately was not taken up seriously by their supervisors. The fact that those students had to work several times harder to master a discipline in a language not familiar to them seemed to be ignored by their supervisors. The next point was the language and its role in the student-supervisor relationship. Not all supervisors were willing to directly and thoroughly assist students with their academic writing struggle. One of the reasons given was the highlight on the content more than the language. Yet, supervisors with applied linguistics background did the other way around, as was admitted by one student. Their assistance with English writing did make the student develop her writing skills.

3. Methodology

The study employed interview as a method of data collection. Briggs (2001, pp.132-134) highlights the practice of interview from a different perspective: that interview is not only an instrument to get some information, but a source of data from which research can be conducted. Interview has some common

characteristics: it commonly consists of a series of questions and answers which may start from the simplest to the complex questions depending on the depth and complexity of data one is intended to get; hence, a classification of formal and informal interviews. The former represents a set of determined and fixed questions beforehand, while the latter primary questions with possible improvised questions during the session. The formal interviews imply a pre-conditioning formulation of questions that reflect the kinds of data the interviewer wishes to obtain from his interviewees. As a matter of fact, interviews have been used by the authority to obtain data on the economic development, social status and political stance of people within a community or society because statistical survey does not seem to be sufficient to get enormous facts of the dynamic and complex society. In addition, interviews can reveal the dynamicity, the heterogeneity or homogeneity of people's mind on particular issue(s). Interview is even a means of constructing people's ideologies and identities. Hence, interviews can rest on a continuum of complexity: from the simplest to the most complex ones, depending on the techniques, purposes, and the depth of the information obtained.

The data for my study was a formal interview in Indonesian language that was conducted with X, a male Indonesian lecturer of approximately 40 years old. The interview was held at one private university in Jakarta. He got his Master and Doctoral degree from one prominent university in USA, and is an expert in Generative Grammar. He finished his study around 8 years ago. The interview with X was carried out on September 4, 2012 at the interviewee's office at 4 pm. The interview was recorded using a *Samsung* Mobile Phone. Shortly after the interview was done, it was transcribed. The transcription was read several times to capture the primary issues of the interview. Afterwards, the transcription was coded. The coding used the first 3 letters of the English translation of all the words stated at least twice. However, words that were stated once were also coded as long as they were related to the main issues. Special attention was given to words that were stated very frequently. Next, the coding was scrutinized and a re-coding of the already coded words was carried out; the goal was to get the essence of the subject's messages behind the general idea (Cáccamo 2001).

As X was a lecturer of English who was also accustomed to the Western culture, he posed a focused interview: an interview that was not out of the context and straight to the point. X clearly stated his experiences, opinion, and reflection on dissertation writing, which supported Labov's research on the educated people's tendency of using standard language as a means of showing a formality of a context into which they are involved (Labov 2000, pp. 462-465).

4. Result

My interviewee basically highlighted 4 issues with regard to his dissertation. The first main issue was the topic of the dissertation: Linguistics, which was coded TOP for *Topic* (vide Table 1). The amount of the words under this code was 61. The most frequent words that appeared were *subject*, *object*, *relative clause*, and *Indonesian*, hence the subject-object relative clause in Indonesian language, which was his area of expertise. The other words stated, such as *konstruksi*, *korpus*, *bahasa*, *bahasa Inggris*, *bahasa Indonesia*, and others were part of his explanation about the dissertation topic.

Table 1. Words under Code TOP

CODE	WORDS	FREQUENCY
TOP	Pinjaman	2
	Konstruksi	2
	Komponen	2
	Korpus	1
	Perbedaan	2
	Anak-anak	3
	Bahasa	4
	Bahasa Inggris	4
	Bahasa Indonesia	7
	Linguistik	4
	Object	8
	Dipasifkan	2
	Relative clause(s)	9
	Penutur	2
	Subject	8
Syntactic Competence	1	
	Total occurrences	61

The second highlight was the dissertation writing process, as was reflected in the lexicons listed in Table 2. The words that belonged to the context were *akademik*, *disertasi*, *menulis*, *revisi* and *pembimbing* among others. They were grouped into one code: WRI for *Writing*, and accounted for 52 words. Note that 29% of the words under code WRI were *menulis*, *penulisan*, and *penulis*. The other words in the same context were *literature*, and words related to research, such as *research*, *research question*, *research method*, and *outcome*.

Table 2. Words under Code WRI

CODE	WORDS	FREQUENCY
WRI	Akademik, ilmiah	5
	Disertasi	6
	Literature, literature	3
	Research, penelitian	4
	Research method	2
	Research question	1
	Outcome	2
	Revisi, koreksi	5
	Pembimbing, professor	7
	Menulis, penulisan, penulis	15
	100 kali	2
	Total occurrences	52

The third focus was the solution for problems that my interviewee encountered when writing his dissertation. Hence, code SOL for *Solution* was given for words in this particular context (vide Table 3), which comprised 28 words. The words *mengalami*, *graduate student*, *kesulitan*, *mengerti*, and *bekerja* were related to the problems Y had when writing his dissertation, and the solutions he came up with.

Table 3. Words under Code SOL

CODE	WORDS	FREQUENCY
SOL	Mengalami	4
	Bagaimana	3
	Lebih	3
	Graduate student	4
	Kesulitan, susah, gak gampang	3
	Mencoba	2
	Mengerti, memahami	4
	Lemah	2
	Bekerja, pekerjaan, tugas	3
	Total occurrences	28

The last emphasis was the genre of academic writing on Generative Grammar. Words that were related to genre, e.g. *berargumen*, *bukti*, *meyakinkan*, *genre*, and *teori* were coded GEN for Genre, comprising 22 words (vide Table 4). My interviewee noted that Generative Grammar scholars were required to provide convincing evidence based on the existing theory to explain particular linguistic phenomena.

Table 4. Words under Code GEN

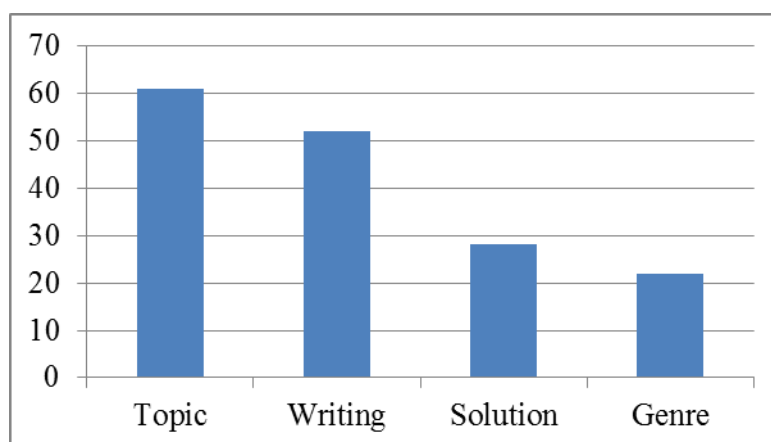
CODE	WORDS	FREQUENCY
GEN	Berargumen	4
	Meyakinkan	3
	Bukti	6
	Genre	2
	Generative Grammar	3
	Teori	4
	Total occurrences	22

5. Discussion

Of 1,235 words uttered, dissertation writing was centered on the importance of mastering one's field of study (61 words), practicing techniques of academic writing (52 words), including adjusting to the academic genre (22 words), and smartly solving any problems related to the writing (28 words) (vide Figure 1).

Other words were peripheral in nature, or merely fillers, e.g. *aaa*, *eee*, *hmm*, and *apa*. It is true then that behind so many words one uttered, there must be particular lexicons that would convey one's intended messages (Kramsch 1998, pp.15, 18, 27); (de Saussure 2000, pp. 25-28); (de Saussure 2000, pp. 107-109); (Vygotsky 2000, p.123). Hence, meanings are expressed through particular words, which will then be deciphered by the hearers or listeners.

Figure 1. Four Main Issues Related to Dissertation Writing



Hence, the primary meaning that my interviewee communicated was the mastery of one's field of study, reflected, among others, in a dissertation. That dissertation is the 'peak' of one's highest academic achievement cannot be separated from the superiority of written culture over oral tradition (Bordieu 2000). Bordieu highlights that the standard language, or the written language, which is formalized, spread and strengthened via schools, rules the society; hence the hegemony of written over spoken culture. In addition, only by writing can the linguistic phenomenon that became topic of the interviewee's dissertation be preserved (Kramsch 1998, pp.53-64), and be read by many readers, one thing that is now possible due to the rapid advancement of technology. However, a dissertation is not merely a symbol or a formal requirement to get a doctoral degree. More importantly, a dissertation is a means of demonstrating one's expertise in the major he chooses, and contributing the expertise to the body of knowledge (Sidnell 2001, pp.34-35); (du Bois 2001, p.88).

Nevertheless, for a non-native English speaker like my interviewee, writing a dissertation on Generative Grammar took him a very tremendous effort and perseverance because of several reasons. The first reason was different academic culture. X admitted that he had not well accustomed to the culture of academic writing even though his major was English Language Teaching. Writing and researching (in English) has not been the culture of most Indonesian academicians for a long time. Thus, the problem was not mainly concerned X's English competence, but cultural differences which are arbitrary (Kramersch 1998, pp.13, 20-21); (Andrade 2006); (Chang and Strauss 2010). In addition, for the native speakers themselves, it is not that simple to be an academic writer; there are strict conventions one needs to adhere to in academic writing (Perry 2001, p.274), let alone the non-native speakers (Kramersch 1998, pp.57, 79-80); (Sidnell 2001, p.35). The second cause was the difficulty adjusting himself to the nature of writing a scientific paper on Generative Grammar. As genre is “. . . socially sanctioned type of communicative event, either spoken . . . – or printed . . . “ (Kramersch 1998, p.62), it may diverge according to the convention of the authorities in one field of study (Bauman 2001, p.81). As a result, it is natural for one to spend some time to adapt or to change his old writing style to the new genre he is into (cf. Buckingham 2008).

Thus, my interviewee strongly emphasized that he first had to realize his own weaknesses when studying overseas (cf. Andrade 2006), such as lack of extensive reading about the subject prior to each lectures, difficulties in finding the appropriate literature, and unfamiliarity with research method and procedures, before he arrived at some possible solutions. Furthermore, he said that it was a must for him to experience the painstaking process of creating a good research report on Generative Grammar in English in an attempt to understand the nature and convention of a scientific writing before reporting his own research. In addition, being a graduate student, he could not avoid the demand of working harder than others so that he could master his subject, and keep up with his colleagues. It was not surprising that only after around a hundred times of trial and error, which was under his professor's supervision (cf. Chang and Strauss 2010), was he able to get some important clues to the native-like scientific writing. In

sum, when writing a dissertation one needs to quickly identify his problems; the sooner he identifies his problems, the sooner he will solve the problem, and the better outcome he will get.

6. Conclusion

I admit that what I presented was a small study. There can be different problems arising from other EFL learners writing their dissertations. They may face more or less difficulties during the process of writing. However, dissertation writing is a long process of learning and experiencing the struggle of producing an English academic paper that would satisfy an international readership. Therefore, mastery of the area of study is mandatory, and that can only be achieved through maximum and continuous exposures to literature, and through conducting a lot of research, and writing the research report. Motivation, unquestionably, will drive one to persistently undergo the meticulous details of the dissertation writing until the dissertation is finally published.

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