ACADEMIC WRITING EXPERIENCE AND STUDENTS’ PERCEPTION OF TEACHER FEEDBACK: A STUDY AT THE CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS AND CROSS CULTURAL STUDIES (CRCSC) GADJAH MADA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

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Introduction
In the academic world, writing holds a special status. It has been an essential part of learning and thinking in the school context, particularly in the light of 21st century demands. Bandura asserts academic writing may be assigned for a variety of educational goal; assessing knowledge, promoting critical thinking, stimulating creativity, encouraging discourse as part of professional community and supporting cognition. Hence, academic writing needs to be learned and developed during learners’ study particularly those who pursue their degree in university. Learners, at this level are expected to be able to organize ideas in conformity and write critically in English with certain standards of prescribed English rhetorical style and genre, as well as reflect accurate grammar.

However, Brown argues that the ability to write is a learned behavior. The idea signifies the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. It should be practiced through experience. As claimed by Hadley in Johanne Myles, writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell piece of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts as in expository or argumentative writing. Perhaps it is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of “writing down” on the one end, to the more complex act of composing on the other end.


However, formulating new ideas can be difficult because it involves transforming or reworking information, which is much more complex than writing as telling. By putting together concepts and solving problems, the writer engages in “a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing texts”. Furthermore to become a proficient writer, a student needs to master some elements such as content, style, and organization as well as surface elements such as grammar, vocabulary and the actual mechanic of writing. Indeed, academic writing requires conscious effort and practices in composing, developing and analyzing ideas.

Hyland & Hyland’s study described the development of learner-centered approaches to writing instruction which emerged the significant of feedback provision and enable students to improve their language proficiency and become confident in their writing abilities. Learner-centered approaches can be used to train students to be good writers as well as autonomous learners. Therefore, providing feedback to students’ writing is one of the most challenging tasks of the teacher. Teachers typically invest a great deal of time and effort in responding to the students’ text with the assumption that their feedback would improve the students’ writing. Similarly, the act of responding to students’ writing can enormously influence students’ attitudes to writing and their motivation for future writing. Students tend to perceive that teacher feedback gives them opportunity to improve their writing. But practically, students can be easily confused by unclear, vogue, and fuzzy comments. They get frustrated with their writing process. On the other hand, students can be positively supported to explore many areas of knowledge and personal creativity through helpful and constructive responses to their writing.

It is interesting then to see the teacher feedback serves as an important source of affecting the development of students’ writing performance. Therefore, this articles aims to investigate students’ perception of teacher feedback by seeing the aspect of feedback students pay attention to, understanding of teacher feedback and strategy to comprehend teacher feedback. This article would be organized as follows. First it reviews some literatures on the topic of academic writing, and teacher feedback. Second, it shows students’ perception of teacher feedback through the document analysis and exploration of individual characteristics such as previous academic background, linguistic differences, students’ need and expectation. Finally, this article comes up with conclusion.

This study was a qualitative approach, since it focused on understanding the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences. Thus, the understanding was an end itself. The research was not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of the setting. Accordingly, participants’ perspectives constructing the social world were very much appreciated in order to empower the participants in the process of the investigation.

The setting of this research was the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies at the Graduate School, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. This program was selected because of the availability of “a sense of boundedness, richness interconnected data and accessibility”. There were four participants in this research, three students and one native English lecturer. In order to respect the participants’ right to privacy and dignity, I used pseudonyms to assure their anonymity. This effort was made to fulfill my commitment to those who assisted in the research activity.

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and avoided a sense of self-denigration, and embarrassment.

It was interesting to investigate the site, the people and environment. Since it is an established Center of Religious and Cross Cultural studies with international reputation, developing students’ language ability and cultivating effective writing skills are pivotal skill for the program. Given the importance of good writing skill for the graduate students, the institution facilitates students in developing their ability by conducting an intensive academic writing class. The class will prepare students to review an article in journal, website, or in a book and students are asked to write their journal weekly in a form of free writing. In this sense, the teacher fully aware of the idea that writing is an interactive activity. Therefore every student’s paper is expected to be revised at least once. In other words, after composing, students are welcome to have feedback either from their lecturer or peers.

There are three types of data collection in this inquiry (1) in-depth interview. This is a semi-structured interview which does not have to follow any specific, predetermined order *(2). Structured interview. Basically it is initial interview employed in juxtaposition with the participants’ document analysis. In structured interview method, the participant is given a set of guiding question. It is conducted in order to describe and interpret the students’ perception of teacher feedback. (3). Document analysis. It is used to document and analyze how student priorities of teacher feedback type including content, organization, grammar, mechanic, and diction affected the development of students’ text. The document generates from students’ essay. Their essays should involve the process of writing such as reviewing, editing, and revising or improving their essays based on teacher feedback. In addition, the document analysis plays essential role as data sources which aims to cross check and to enrich the under pinning of data. Three types of data are used to explore the same phenomena from different angles that later on ensured a more balance approach to this study.

**The Nature of Academic Writing**

Academic writing should be understood as an umbrella term under which a wide and a diverse range of approaches to the practice of writing are categorized. In the educational world, students are required to undertake a variety of writing tasks depending on their chosen degree. Typically, these tasks will vary from one to another; however, each assignment type of writing has a clear structure to follow. In other words, the style of English in students’ writing relies on some factors such as the purpose of assignment, the preferred structure of the assignment type, and the audiences for whom it is intended. Broadly defined, as stated by Swales and Feak that the characteristic of academic writing can be viewed as a product of many considerations including audiences, purpose, organization, style, flow, and presentation. Consequently, to be successful in writing task, a student should have an understanding of audience’s expectation, the purpose of writing, prior knowledge, the regular pattern of organization, and must communicate consistently and appropriately both for the message being conveyed as well as for the audience.*

Briefly, academic writing seems to be a unique type of writing which has special feature. However, Davis & McKay strengthen that even though it is unique, academic writing shares special features with other writing through using it in different ways such as the use of formal style, and a structured of argument and the call for research and documentation. All these techniques and skills are involved in academic writing are adaptable and useable outside the academic writing classroom.*

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Brown mentions that academic writing genre consists of paper and general subject reports, essay, compositions, academically focused journals, short-answer test responses, technical reports (e.g. lab report), theses and dissertation. In classroom practices, much of academic writing will be in the form of essay.11

In term of approach, while Jordan offers two approaches of academic writing namely, process and product approach.12 The product oriented approach views that writing process as linier one which can be determined by the writer before starting to write. It focuses on the composition made up a series of part- words, sentences, and paragraphs- but not on the whole discourse with meaning and ideas.13 On the other hand, process approach is an approach to writing, where language learners focus on the process by which they produce their written products rather than on the products themselves. In the end, learners surely need to and are required to complete their products, yet the writing process itself is stressed more. By focusing on the writing process, learners come to understand themselves more, and find how to work through the writing. They may explore what strategies conform to their style of learning. Brown states that writing is a thinking process, a writer produces a final written product based on their thinking after the writer goes through the thinking process.14

Finally Seow divides writing process into four stages, namely planning, drafting, revising, and editing.15 In response to this debate, we should not neglect the fact that the approaches correspond to two perspectives for looking at the writing. There is no one best way to understand and to teach such a complex skill as writing. We could only say that the process approach give people a new way of looking at writing creatively, whereas the product-approach gives the idea that grammar and syntax are also important feature of writing that can't be eliminated in writing proficiency. Thus, there is a need to integrate the two approaches into one unified theory in which a student writers and teacher-readers can explore meaningful discourse together.

**Teacher Feedback on Students’ Writing**

Providing feedback seems to be necessary task for the teacher. Basically, teacher assume that feedback can help students in the learning process and provides the kind of individualized attention which seldom happens under normal conditions. As writers, students want to know how reader will respond to their work. Through teacher feedback, the response offers an opportunity for students to figure out the reader’s response and learn from it.

Hyland convincingly states that feedback in learning process can be seen as crucial for both encouraging the development of students’ writing and consolidating their learning.16 This idea is derived from the theory that knowledge is a social construct rather than a cognitive entity and that learning is a social process. Accordingly, learning cannot be conceptualized as an entity that we transfer from the mind of one person to another. Learning should be viewed as an active, social, and constructive process in a context that is fostered through transactions with others. In other words, feedback is a medium of interaction within the context of interpersonal classroom relationship.17

Teacher feedback on students’ writing is an important channel of teacher-student interaction which refers to the process of

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providing commentary on students’ work in which the teacher reacts to the ideas in print, assesses students’ strengths and weaknesses and suggests direction for improvement. This feedback is delivered written on the blank space of paper of the students’ essay or spoken to the students in short conferences. Traditionally students receive feedback on the formal occasion of the return of their graded essays. Hitherto, recently feedback both written and oral are integrated in the writing process and received along with the students’ working on their composition.18

A wide range of techniques have been proposed to provide teacher feedback form. According to Bardine et al.,19 teacher feedback could be categorized into three classifications 1). a word or words 2). a symbol including correcting code by underlying or cycling a word 3). a combination of both words and symbols. Leki points out that there are two types of teacher feedback namely ‘surface errors’ and ‘global concerns’. Surface errors are those connected to grammar, syntax, spelling, and so on; while global concerns comprise such things as overall organization, sign posting, cohesion, and clarity of meaning.20 Whereas, according to Hyland teacher feedback consists of five common type. They are commentary feedback, cover sheets, minimal marking feedbacks, tape comments, and electronic feedback. 21

It is notably of believed that the strength of giving feedback to students’ writing lies on the fact that teacher can address more personalized comments and assess students’ potency and flaw as well as communicate directly to students. Yet the significance of proving feedback to students’ academic writing does not guarantee the teacher to provide appropriate feedback. The study conducted by Mc Donald found that the ideal of teacher-students shared understanding is defectively realized in practice. Teacher feedback often lacks of thought, students often misunderstand their teacher feedback, students writing frequently receive teachers regress, and many students fail to benefit from teacher feedback.22

Given the fact that teacher feedback is less effective, we need to observe the underlying reason why students may get things wrong in term of responding to teacher feedback. As refers to Johnson’s idea introducing two different situations caused students the wrong response. The first is that they simply do not have the appropriate knowledge, and so the knowledge or skill the students have is incomplete. This is what we call error. The second situation is that learners lack the processing ability. The second is called as mistake. The problem in this context does not lie whether the learner’s knowledge right or wrong, instead the learner has difficulty in performing the knowledge he or she has required in operating conditions. As a result, he or she does not correct his or her wrong doing even after careful re-examination. These two distinctive situations lead us to the feedback practice in writing pedagogy.23 Bialystok argues that the first situations relates to the learner knowledge of the formal properties to the learner knowledge of the formal properties of the target linguistic codes, while the second stresses the ability to make the use of the formal properties to express meaning and content.24 Students need to know two kinds of knowledge in processing feedback to refine their writing skill, the knowledge of formal properties in the target language as well as the knowledge in

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order to develop their procedural knowledge for creating and expressing their ideas. As proposed by Johnson, there are some factors to consider which enable teacher feedback to function more effectively namely:

a. A desire or need of the learner to correct the wrong behavior;

b. An internal representation of what the correct behavior looks like (i.e. the learner's own understanding about the correct behavior);

c. The realization of the occurrence of the wrong behavior;

d. An opportunity to re-practice the skill as reinforcement.

Hence, it is suggested that teacher in providing feedback should think deliberately about the better ways of motivating students to attend to the error rather than relying on heavily on how the teacher spot the errors.

How do Students Perceive of Teacher Feedback?

The individual characteristics such as educational background, previous writing experience, students' need and expectation of teacher feedback and linguistic differences seem to stand in the way students perceive of teacher feedback. The result of this study tends to support the idea of Altman et al., in that way we perceive, or interpret the information depends on several factors including our needs, values, feeling, and past experience. As shown in the study, a student who has belief that grammar should precede content, organization of ideas, vocabulary and mechanics would more focus on surface level rather than global concerns. As a result, his revision was simply for grammatical practice, not for developing new ideas. As shown in this document below:

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On the other hand, students who are more concerned about content and the organization of ideas view revision as a means of developing new ideas and expressing creativity. That is why they try to revise teacher feedback on content and to view teacher feed as a medium for solving her problem for the sake of a better understanding of the cultural context of English words, and the characteristic of good academic writing. As described in this document:

The investigation reveals that students do not notice all aspects of feedback. It indicated that students probably simply decide not to incorporate all of teacher feedback. Sometime students who focus on content of the writing do not pay any attention to grammatical symbol or correction code. Since they believe that these aspects would not hinder the meaning of their writing. On the other hand, because of the revision ease, it is easier to copy the appropriate vocabulary than rewrite the whole section of the text in response to suggestion on text-based revision. Students also tend to neglect feedback on content. As shown in this document:
It indicated that students might be selective in incorporating the kind of revision suggested. Because basically, in comparison to suggestion on the surface level, text-based changes seem to be more difficult to recognize. It confirms that teacher feedback on content and organization are privileged and directly become the focus of students' revision leading to substantial changes.

The written feedback on content and organization of ideas potentially had played a significant role in the students' learning. Firstly, it engaged student in reflective learning, secondly, it increased reader's awareness to the students as writers, and thirdly, it enhanced the students' motivation to write well. Finally teacher feedback contributed to the students' awareness of what constitutes of good writing, and the general structure of English essay.

The idea above expressed by some participants in the excerpt interview as follows: In my opinion, teacher feedback contributes to my writing keep focused, the title should match with what we are going to discuss, and there is a thesis statement, and a conclusion which constitutes a conclusion of the structure of our ideas and academic topic sentence. As a note to remember, in academic writing we do not allow to write with too romantic style, and try to eliminate it, or we may lose its' formality. (Initial-Interview-Neina-)

I agree with his feedback. I like to write, however I've got some difficulties such as need extra time to write, how to start writing, and so on. Fortunately when I took the course, I was enlightened. I got an idea how to get started writing clearly, systematically, and how to write fast and effectively. Since then I have a courage to write a paper, and have been familiar with the pattern of writing. (Initial-Interview-Laila)

More specifically, the study shows that teacher feedback on vocabulary and commentary on content consider as a means of an active source of learning. Commentary in the form of criticism encourages students to think critically about their writing performance and help them in learning. Teacher's criticism is more preferred and lasted long term in their mind rather than a compliment or praise. The merit of teacher's criticism is to lead students to greater cognitive engagement and to reflection on rhetorical skills which in turn promote their writing skills.

In line with the idea above, the participant reported in the excerpt interview below: When the instructor provided appropriate vocabulary on his correction, sometimes I adopt it, or I ignore it. I write with my own words and my own style. In my opinion, the process of writing is just like "going with the flow". It develops and expands automatically as we often write. I more remember teacher feedback on comment. For me a criticism is easier to remember than an appraisal. From teacher feedback, I learnt how to make a vivid and compact conclusion as well. (Initial-Interview-Neina)

First of all teacher feedback makes my ineffective writing becomes more effective. There is no abundance repetition of words or sentences anymore due to teacher feedback. Then last time, I discussed with the English lecturer on the way to make the long, ineffective, and repetitive sentence into the simple and effective one. Ten words were changed into five words. To me it is interesting. How a sentence should be focused and the point is clear. So through teacher feedback, my writing is well organized a paragraph, by paragraph, and easy to read. Such as Jhon Rein's writing, his sentence is short but easy to understand. (Initial-Interview-Mosez)
Last time I wrote a paper of Mark Woodward’s class, and I make it into narrative style even though the content is very formal and the tone should be serious, and I wrote the sentence such as: “he walked slowly without turning his head”. I think it is effective an interesting. (Struc-Interview-Mosez)

Based on their reflection above, finally they come to the understanding of what constitutes of good academic writing such as:
1. Begin with point or thesis statement;
2. Support your thesis with evidence;
3. Organize and connect the specific evidence;
4. Write clear and effective sentences;
5. Avoid the use of repetitive and artistic words.

Responding to teacher feedback is not always easy. Some feedback was clear but other was confusing. The students seem to be puzzled with some kind of grammatical symbols, correction codes, and teacher commentary such as awkward, unclear idea, too general, etc. Interestingly, the students often undertake a sequence of active processes namely discussion with their teacher, or writing conferences, rereading the comments, understanding the comments, looking at the yellow pen carefully to identify what errors they made, checking, remembering the previous input, and reflecting on what they have experience beforehand. At this process, the students perform some strategies to understand and interpret teacher feedback for example cognitive and metacognitive strategy. As cited by Oxford there are four sets of cognitive strategy including practicing, receiving, and sending messages, analyzing, and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output.27 Meanwhile, according to Richard and Lockhart meta-cognitive strategy refers to a strategy which allows students to control their own learning through organizing, planning, and evaluating their learning.28

All of the students in the present study typically perceive that teacher feedback is an important way of teacher-student interaction in the process of writing either as problem solver or helpful assistance. This idea is related to the students’ need to meet the demand of an academic writing standard and their expectations of teacher feedback to correct all their mistakes and fix them. This finding concurs with the idea of Vygotsky who discusses a stage in the cognitive growth called ZPD or “the zone of proximal development” where skills are extended through the guidance and response of the expertise of others.29 In other words when students learn, they make any errors and rely heavily on teacher’s corrective advice. After much practice, they ultimately reach a point at which they can perform the skill well on their own way. There is a point in which student could perform well if they are given a help in determining through problem solving under adult guidance or teachers. Thus, teaching might occur when assistance is provided at points in the ZPD at which the performance requires assistance. As expressed in the excerpt interview as follows:

After reading my paper, the lecturer searched the short story I investigated. He criticized my paper that sounds too neutral, too descriptive and lack of critical analysis. He suggest that I should alter the story into the prevailing short story trend, and focus on what I concern. (Struct-Interview- Laila)

Written feedback usually more focuses on grammar, while writing conference with the teacher is more on content. The discussion on content of my writing is harder and exhausting since I have to rewrite, revise and revise...just like his comment on my last writing to stick my position firmly. Whereas grammar correction is easier to amend, since it is due to human’s carelessness. Everybody understands it. (Struct-Interview- Moses)

Finally, it is suggested that the way teacher comments on and deals with the students’ writing directly influence the way student perceive teacher feedback. For this reason, with respect to teacher in providing feedback,

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I suggest that feedback be delivered and take into account the personal dimension of writing such as motivation, cognitive skill, and being flexible in performing teacher-student conferences particularly when communication breakdown appears to happen.

Conclusion
Investigating students’ perceptions of teacher feedback on their academic writing in which their perceptions influence revision reflects a rich and complex array of processes which can function to promote almost ideal instruction in academic writing and students’ learning. The investigation tries to improve the characteristics of individual students as learners and to improve the techniques of providing feedback. In summary, this study shares a special concern with empowering students and teachers to provide constructive feedback aimed at individualization of feedback practices, caring for the differentiation of learners through the enhancement of feedback that enables student become independent and responsible learners.

This study reveals that students’ perceptions of teacher feedback vary considerably according to their educational background, experience, need, expectation, and students’ linguistic differences. These aspects seem to stand in the way of how students perceive of teacher feedback. In addition, their perceptions are also directly linked to the teachers’ feedback practices, which may be aimed at mechanical and grammatical accuracy or to fluency of ideas generated, organization, style and content. Thus, the results of the study are described as follows:

a. Students who believed in content as a paramount aspect in writing paid greater attention to content rather than grammar. Feedback helped students to improve both surface level and text-based level of changes in revision leading to substantive changes. In contrast, students who over emphasized grammar, fixed merely sentence level (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics) but not to content and organization of ideas;

b. Regardless of students’ preferences on teacher feedback types, they typically tended to actively apply some strategies like cognitive strategies mainly to deal with grammatical symbols/code, meta linguistic strategies to cope with teacher feedback on content and organization and social strategies such as writing conference, peer/colleagues dialogue to clarify teacher feedback meaning;

c. Having received teacher feedback on grammar, vocabulary, organization of ideas, content and mechanics, students were aware of teacher feedback role as a medium to deepen their perspective, promote critical thinking, problem solving and motivate their ability to write;

d. The teacher feedback on content tended to be more difficult to incorporate than feedback on surface level;

e. There existed some aspect which influenced the way students revised. The first was the revision ease, since it was easier to copy the appropriate vocabulary than to rewrite the whole section of the text in response to suggestion on text-based revision. The second was the students’ priority on the some aspects of feedback. The third was the situational variables in writing.

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