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An Analysis of English Thesis Writing

AN ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH THESIS WRITING: A Case Study of English Department of UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung

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Abstract: This is a report of a study designed to examine the process of thesis – a final (research-based) paper for undergrads prior to academic completion – writing of English Department students who graduated in Academic Year 2007/2008. Using a descriptive method, this case study aimed to describe the stages, to identify the problems, and to explore the techniques of solving problems used by respondents in the thesis writing by involving six students who had engaged in writing and research project course. The data concerning writing stages, problems, and coping with strategies were collected by using questionnaires, interviews, and documentation (thesis). The results showed that all participants went through the thesis writing stages determined by Faculty of Adab of UIN Sunan Gunung Djati, Bandung, namely: 1) Starting process; 2) Researching; 3) Reporting; and 4) Doing consultation. These also showed that all respondents encountered: 1) Procedural problems, which were likely to be the major problems shared by all respondents; 2) Academic problems; and 3) Non-academic problems. However, whatever problems they dealt with, each of them had his/her own strategies to cope with. The procedural and academic problems were coped with by reading, doing consultation, and peer-collaboration. Meanwhile, non-academic problems were solved by having a rest and managing time.

Keywords: *analysis, thesis, stages, problems, and solutions*

INTRODUCTION

Being able to graduate from a university is a wish of most undergraduate students because those who have graduated show that they have been able to pass the most difficult work, namely, research paper (henceforth, it is called as *thesis*) writing. In Writing *thesis* is not as easy as writing a diary; in fact, it is about a gate of graduation (Alwasilah & Alwasilah 2005). Those who are able to pass the gate mean that they have performed several such stages of study as finding a topic, proposing a problem, defending the proposed problem, as the starting point, to a supervisor or academic committee to convince that the topic

chosen sounds well and to gain approval to proceed with the actual research (Brotowidjoyo, 1997); researching; and reporting research (Reid 1993).

The problem is that it is hardly easy to write an understandable research report. It means that research is not complete until the researchers have summarized and presented the work in such a manner that others in their field can understand and reproduce all they have accomplished (Brotowidjoyo 1997). Considering this, viewed from the duration of learning English, students are seemingly able to write well because they have been studying English since they were at the first grade of Junior High School to University

level. However, it was surprising when I saw some smart students who were initially able to smoothly complete the courses, yet proven incapable when they were asked to write *thesis*. Even, some of them, later, dropped out of their study.

The central focus of this study is not the finished text, but the writers' behaviors before, during, and after the act of writing. Writing is described as a series of interrelated behaviors (Gibson, 2002). For instance, to produce a thesis, a student might first discuss the issue with friends, later jot down key points, and then write a first draft as research proposal. The ideas might be discussed with others. The draft is revised and it is finally edited and published.

Brown (1994) suggests that the traditional way of looking at writing has been seeing it as a linear process that has three stages: The first stage is pre-writing, in which it is sharply focused on several activities including exploring a subject, formulating and testing a thesis, gathering evidence and outlining the essay. The second stage is drafting the essay. In this stage, one needs to determine what he can best accomplish in writing, select a subject and organize the information about it into meaningful clusters, find connection among those clusters and discover the relationship that links the connections. The third one is revising the topic, organization, and style. Roughly, the steps are to think, write, and revise.

Furthermore, this present study chose many theories used to support the findings of the present study, restricting to the stages, problems, and techniques to solve the problems. The theory of reading and writing skills are seemingly supporting the finding of this study because such skills are used by all respondents to tackle the procedural and academic problems. The theory of academic writing is used to emphasize that the genre used in this study is *thesis*

or thesis, further explained in Section D of Chapter II. The theory of dynamics of a research report is presented to show that *thesis* writing has common stages to do. This seems to support the findings about stages of writing in which most respondents based their theory on it. The theory of essential problems is to support the findings regarding the problems that most respondents encountered during thesis writing. Meanwhile, the related research findings are presented in this chapter to empower the findings of the present study and to compare whether the present study findings are in line with or contradictory to them.

By choosing the English Department students who have finished their thesis writing as the respondents of study, this study aims to describe the stages, to identify the problems, and to explore the techniques of solving problems used by them in the thesis writing.

The emerging results from this study may be beneficial for English Departments' students, lecturers, English program, and other researchers. In other words, the results of study are expected to facilitate students starting to think about the research paper, to give contributions to the lecturers interested in research methodology or research project to improve their teaching competence. Also, they provide some information to the English Program about the problems encountered in the thesis writing so that the English program knows how to overcome such problems. Finally, they give input to other researchers who want to carry out another study in the same field with certain interest.

Finally, to avoid over claimed results of the study, this study is limited to identify the process of writing – stages used, the problems encountered, and the techniques of solving problems used by respondents in the thesis writing.

METHOD

A qualitative research was adopted as the method of this study to explore the process and describe the research results. Since there were six participants involved in this study, the data collected through survey questionnaire, interview, and documentation analysis, as the method of data collection, were compared and contrasted each other to find differences and similarities in the process of *thesis* writing. Merriam (1988) calls it as a multi case study where participants have similar importance in demonstrating the phenomenon under study.

Before the data gathering process,

a preliminary study was conducted to get an initial overview about *thesis* writing process experienced by students and get the framework of appropriate questions used in the study. This preliminary research was done by randomly distributing questionnaire and interviewing the students who graduated on April 25, 2007 and were not included in the major study.

The closed-questionnaire technique consisting of a list of questions was used to get the information about the respondents': a) demographic information; b) literacy background including the frequency and type of their reading and writing habits; c)

Table 1.
 Stages of thesis writing Process

Stages of <i>Thesis</i> Writing Process		Respondent								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	F	%	
Initial process	a. finding a topic	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	
	the reasons of selecting and finding a topic	1. specificity	√	√				√	3	50
		2. manageability	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100
		3. curiosity	√	√			√	√	4	67
		4. significance	√	√		√	√	√	5	83
		5. objectivity	√	√	√		√	√	5	83
		6. familiarity	√		√			√	3	50
b. proposing a topic	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100		
c. defending proposal	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100		
Researching	a. posing research question	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	
	b. preparing instruments	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	
	c. plunging into the field	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	
	d. collecting data	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	
	e. analyzing data	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	
Writing Report of Study/ Reporting	a. prewriting	1. freewriting	√	√	√	√	√		5	83
		2. outlining		√	√		√		3	50
		3. brainstorming			√	√		√	3	50
		4. reading	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100
	b. writing	1. peer-conferencing	√	√	√	√	√		5	83
		2. highlighting the focal ideas		√				√	2	33
		3. coding	√	√	√	√		√	5	83
		4. mapping ideas	√	√				√	3	50
	c. revising	1. rewriting	Ideas	√					1	17
			Grammar					√	1	17
Quotation				√					1	17
2. proofreading			√	√		√	√		4	67
			√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100
			√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100
Consultation		√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	

writing process covering the stages, the problems, and the solutions to solve the problems they faced in *thesis* writing; and d) opinion, perception, and experiences about *thesis* writing.

Unstructured interview were debated to six participants of research to know and describe their stages, problems, techniques to solve the problems in the process of *thesis* writing. In a case study, interviewing is necessary when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate (Merriam 1988). In addition, this was used to provide the interviewee with broad freedom of expression and elaboration and often resemble informal talks (Seliger & Shohamy 1989).

The documentation (participants' thesis) was used as an artifact as another source of data, to support, enrich, or even confirm the informed data acquired from the interview by reading and learning what they wrote (Merriam 1988). The respondents' thesis, readily accessed in the campus library, were read and learnt to clarify whether the respondents' statements in questionnaire and interview data were similar to theirs. The clarifications toward respondents' thesis and thesis feedback papers, easily asked from all respondents, were focused on the stages and mistakes done in thesis writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This session devotes some aspects to do with the findings of the research, gained through questionnaire, interview, and documentation (students's thesis) analysis. Data presentation and discussion of this research are presented simultaneously in this chapter. The findings are discussed and interpreted by comparing them with some theoretical foundations as reviewed in the chapter II of this research.

The Stages of Thesis Writing

Based on *the questionnaire,*

interview, and documentation (thesis) analysis, all respondents experienced the stages of thesis writing: 1) initial process including finding and proposing the research proposal. This first stage is a particularly significant finding since it coincides with that once the participants have decided on a specific topic, it is necessary for them to write a research proposal and defend it (Brotowodjono, 1997). This is also in line with several respondents' statements that they look for a specific, interesting, and observable topic to be proposed, then to be studied; 2) Researching consisting of posing research questions, preparing instruments, plunging into the field, collecting and analyzing the data.

This second stage which all respondents did the procedures approved by their supervisors to plunge into the field and analyze the collected data after posing research questions and preparing instruments of data collection were done when the respondents got approval to go on and plunge into the field to collect data (Hacker 2003); 3). In this third stage, all respondents, similarly, reported that they initially prewrote by freewriting, outlining, brainstorming, and reading to generate and develop ideas. Some of these techniques (outlining and reading) are contradictory to the suggestion that to generate ideas, the writers could free write, work in group, brainstorm, and keep a journal (Brown 2001); 4). Consultation. Regarding this, it cannot be denied that in the conduct of this study, consultation was obliged to do (Craswell 2005). This is in line with some respondents' statement that without consultation, their thesis would never be finished.

The followings are the overall findings on the stages of the thesis writing used by respondents as the result of questionnaire and interview analysis.
The Problems of Thesis Writing Process
Dealing with the problems

Tabel 2.
 Problems of thesis writing process

Types of Perceived Problems		RESPONDENT								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	F	%	
Procedural Problems	Getting started to write	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100	
	Building coherence statement		√		√	√		3	50	
	Crosschecking experts' ideas with finding	√			√	√		3	50	
	Quoting	√		√	√	√		4	67	
	Finding references	√	√	√	√		√	5	83	
	Concluding remarks	√	√	√				3	50	
	Writing Abstract		√					1	17	
Academic Problems	Lack of Receptive and Productive Skill	√	√	√	√			4	67	
	Lack of Rhetorical Knowledge and L1 Interference		√		√	√	√	4	67	
	Lack of Research Knowledge and Instruction			√		√		2	33	
	Lack of Practice	√			√			2	33	
Non-Academic Problems	Physical Problems	Fatigue		√	√			2	33	
		Dizziness	√					1	17	
		Headache				√			1	17
	Psychological Problems	Sleepiness					√		1	17
		Strain					√		1	17
		Anxiety		√			√		2	33
		Lack of Motivation	√						1	17
Technical Problems	Advisors' Activities and Business	Less of Self-Confidence					√	1	17	
			√	√	√		√	4	67	

occurred in the *thesis* writing, all respondents seemed to perceive the problems of *thesis* writing. From questionnaire and interview data, the problems are identified into procedural (problems related to how people do best for their writing), academic (problems related to the competences possessed by respondents), and non-academic problems (problems related to internal and external circumstances).

In relation to procedural problems, all respondents had trouble in finding out the topic and starting to write the introduction. Likewise, this happens to most writers, even professionals, had trouble in getting started (Becker at al. 1986) In this problems, the respondents also have trouble with the systematic structure of an abstract. In addition, the students have academic problems, namely they could hardly finish their *thesis* due to the fact that they lack of

receptive and productive skills as well as rhetorical knowledge and first language interference. This is relevant to the notion that one will use his/her reading and writing skill together to be an effective writer in college level courses (Gibson 2002). Meanwhile, regarding non-academic problems, based on the interview data, all respondents dealt with physical, psychological, technical, financial, and environmental problems. All respondents experienced different types of physical problems: dizziness, fatigue, Headache, strain, and sleepiness. Physical block occurs when the writers are tired and it just becomes too much of an effort to continue (Beard & Hartley, 1984) In terms of psychological problems, four respondents also encountered different types of problems: lack of motivation, anxiety, and less self-confidence. These problems also caused them get stuck to write. Writers'

Table 3.
 Solutions of problems of *thesis* writing process

Types of Problems	Types of Solutions	Respondent							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	F	%
Solutions for procedural and academic problems	Reading and Coding	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100
	Practice in Free writing	√		√	√	√		4	67
	Consultation and Peer-Collaboration	√	√	√	√	√	√	6	100
	Stop Writing at the Right Point	√		√	√	√		4	67
Solutions for non-academic problems	Taking a Rest		√	√	√	√		4	67
	Time Management	√	√		√	√	√	5	83

block occurs when they think hard to get the best first draft (Beard & Hartley 1984; Craswell 2005). In line with the matter of non-academic problems, four respondents encountered technical problems – advisors’ bustle. Failing to meet busy advisors was sometimes found as a problem for most participants (Sugaryamah 2004; Herdiah 2005).

The followings are the overall findings on the problems of the thesis writing used by respondents as the result of questionnaire and interview analysis.

The Techniques of Solving Problems

Regarding the techniques of problem solving in *thesis* writing, the present study identifies six techniques used by all respondents to overcome the problems. In the similar sounds they said “all the problems can be solved”. This corresponds to the notion that every problem has a solution (Broughton et al. 1978).

There are many techniques used by all respondents to solve the procedural, academic, and non-academic problems in *thesis* writing: The first technique is reading a lot of books. All respondents used this technique to solve procedural and academic problems. Reading what other people have written about the subject is probably the most common strategy for gathering information for starting to write (Beard 1984; Musthafa 2005)

The second technique is consultation and peer-collaboration. All respondents asked and consulted their *thesis* to their classmates and supervisors when they got procedural and academic problems. As a matter of fact, consultation is informal discussion with teachers and friends as an important preparation and a foil for the necessarily individual and solitary business of writing (Taylor, 1990).

The third technique is a free writing practice Most respondents used this technique when they got stuck. Writing anything comes to mind is , in fact, in other words of free writing because it is sort of like talking to himself, but doing it with ink in order to keep the ideas flowing (Gibson 2002).

The fourth technique is stop writing at the right point. Some respondents used this technique when they needed to stop writing. Writing is not like making his ears wiggle or touching the tip of your nose with the tip or your tongue, but it is long and complex process (Lauer et al. 1981).

The fifth technique is taking a rest. This technique was used by several respondents to overcome physical and psychological blocks. Correspondingly, Beard and Hartley (1984) physical block occurs when the writer is tired and it just becomes too much an effort to continue (Beard & Hartley 1984). The last technique used by most

respondents is time management. Most respondents used this technique when they were difficult to consult to the busy supervisors, to write, and to collect data through questionnaire and interview. Kareviati (2004) argues that time management was the technique used by most respondents due to they were difficult to meet the busy supervisors.

Finally, the present study clarifies the respondents' *thesis* whether they did the stages and experienced the problems of *thesis* writing as all respondents stated in questionnaire and interview data. Having read and learnt all the respondents' *thesis*, it was found that their *thesis* have the structure of a report, including preliminary sections, introduction, covering the purpose of writing the *thesis*, background information, scope, methodology, assumption and limitations; body of the report; conclusion and recommendation; reference list; and appendices (Kimberly & Cotesta 1998)

The followings are the overall findings on the solution of problems of the *thesis* writing used by respondents as the result of questionnaire and interview analysis.

CONCLUSION

The data obtained from the questionnaires are generally the same as that of gained from the interviews. From the data analysis it may be concluded that there are four stages in the process of thesis writing. First of all, it is the initial process includeing finding a topic, proposing a topic, and defending the proposed topic. The most interesting finding at this stage is that the respondents went through different ways to find a topic of their own. To be more precise, some of them took account of the specificity, manageability, and curiosity. Meanwhile, some others took account of the significance, objectivity, and familiarity of a certain topic.

The second stage is researching,

consisting of posing the research question, preparing the instruments, going to the field, collecting data, and analyzing the data. Some respondents conducted the research in a recursive way. This way helped the respondents to determine which was to be done first and which was to be done next; then, moving back and forth among each stage. The third stage is reporting including prewriting, drafting, and revising. All respondents underwent those stages, but they did it in a recursive way. To be precise, the writer moves within the components as necessary, perhaps they move from pre-writing to drafting, then back to pre-writing again, then move forward to editing and going back to drafting before reporting the thesis for sharing or publication.

At the fourth stage all the respondents dealt with various problems. These problems fall into several categories, namely procedural, academic, and non-academic problems. As far as procedural problems are concerned, most respondents had trouble in getting started to write, building coherent sentences, crosschecking experts' ideas against the findings, quoting, and finding references. In relation to the academic problems, most respondents lack of receptive and productive skills, and rhetorical knowledge. Besides, they may also be exposed to L1 interference. Meanwhile, regarding non-academic problems, most respondents experienced physical problems (e.g. fatigue), psychological problems (e.g. anxiety), and technical problems (e.g. advisors' bustle). At the fifth stage all the problems encountered by the respondents during the process of thesis writing were overcome by themselves by reading and coding, practicing in free writing, consultation and peer-collaboration, stopping writing at the right point, taking a rest, and time management.

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