

## DEVELOPING THEORIES OF TEACHING ACADEMIC INDONESIAN TO NON-LANGUAGE MAJORS: WAYS OF COLLECTING AND ANALYZING DATA

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### Abstract

Writing is the skill most neglected in language education in Indonesia. High school graduates in general are not ready to write academic Indonesian, let alone academic English. This paper discusses practices of teaching Indonesian at pre-college and college levels, theories and practice of writing, and language versus non-language specialists as writing instructors. The objectives of this paper are to demonstrate that: (1) different techniques of data collection generate different types of data, (2) the more data you have, the better you triangulate the findings, and (3) the quality of data is not only determined by its collecting techniques, but also by its relevance with research objectives. In this paper, I want to share the methodology of several studies on teaching writing at college levels I have conducted in the last eight years in English and non-English departments in Indonesia. The studies have revealed the following: (1) language education has failed to provide pre-college students with fundamentals of academic writing, (2) freshman Indonesian should be focused on developing academic or technical writing, (3) the success of teaching academic writing at college levels is dependent on the success of teaching writing at pre-college levels, (4) non-Indonesian language lecturers have the potential to be empowered to teach academic writing in non-language departments, (5) ethnic literature-based writing has the potential to revitalize the ethnic literature, and (6) collaborative writing including peer reviewing and teacher-student conferencing has been effective for coping with big classes of writing.

**Keywords:** College Indonesian, collaborative writing, qualitative research

### INTRODUCTION

The findings of L1 and L2 process-writing research broadly suggest, among others, as follows: (1) general composing process patterns seem to be similar in L1 and L2, (2) skilled writers compose differently from novices, (3) skilled writers use more effective planning and revising strategies, and (4) L1 strategies may or may not be transferred to L2 contexts (Hyland, 2002). Meanwhile, research on writing in English L1 contexts has been conducted along four interrelated dimensions, namely, education, psychology, linguistics, and rhetoric/compositions (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Another way of seeing it, research on writing can be classified into four major strands, depending on the focus of research: writer-oriented, reader-oriented, text-oriented, or context-oriented (cf. Hyland, 2002). All these perspectives are useful and have significantly contributed to our understanding of writing, the teaching of writing, and of developing a writing curriculum. An idealized writing curriculum would combine emphases from the writing product, the process, the social context, and the subject-matter content (Raimes, 1991). This underscores the importance of incorporating different perspectives of writing and teaching writing for enhancing theoretical sensitivity and developing a writing curriculum.

At advanced levels, where students are expected to have mastered basic literacy skills, they are required to develop academic writing skills. Writing for them is not only concerned with personal and interpersonal communication, but it is also concerned with analyzing, critically interpreting, and synthesizing messy sets of information. In the Indonesian context, undergraduate students are required to write a *skripsi*, which is a mini research-based paper on topics of student interest. *Skripsi* writing improves students' critical thinking, as it is not only a medium of expression, but also a medium of mastering a new knowledge. Following is a summary the survey findings of writing mainly in the dimension of tertiary education.

Based on a dissertation survey (Alwasilah, 1991), most Indonesian students reported that writing academic papers that meet the expectation of American professors constitutes the most difficult academic routine, followed by in-class oral presentation, and group discussions. This finding shows that cultural and educational backgrounds could explain various problems experienced by EFL student writers.

Another survey by Alwasilah (1997) on the teaching of College Indonesian at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) has revealed that more than 50% of 89 respondents confirmed that the materials of the course are basically a review of spelling, punctuation, grammar, effective sentences, standard and non-standard sentences, sentence patterns, and paragraph development. According to 93.25% of the respondents, all of these materials are a repetition of high school materials, thus nothing is new.

As expected by the respondents, College Indonesian should be redesigned to teach academic writing or technical writing as commonly practiced in American colleges.

Research by Alwasilah (2000) on collaborative writing, teacher feedback, peer feedback, and multiple drafting involving 29 graduate students of English Education at UPI in Bandung has yielded the following findings:

1. Collaborative writing develops self-awareness of the complexity of writing and motivates them to write.
2. Collaborative writing can be applied at all levels of education.
3. Collaborative writing plays more social functions rather than linguistic ones.
4. Instructor feedback is helpful mainly for improving the rhetoric.
5. Peer feedback is useful and it has made them critical of their own mistakes.
6. Multiple drafting improves writing especially in vocabulary and mechanics.
7. Better writers get fewer comments (feedback) on grammar but more feedback on content.

On teaching writing in high schools, a survey by Alwasilah (2001), involving 100 freshman students who just graduated from high schools in West Java, has concluded the following:

1. Writing is the most neglected subject in school.
2. Writing is the language skill most difficult to learn by students and to teach by teachers.
3. In general, high school students are taught by inexperienced writing instructors.
4. Writing lessons teach grammar and theories of writing rather than the practice of writing.
5. In general students' writing assignments are not returned to them.
6. Practice is the best way of developing writing skills.

More recent survey (Alwasilah, 2004) was conducted on the perceived contribution of reading ethnic literature to the development of writing skill both in English and Indonesian. The survey, involving 179 EFL majors at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, has drawn the following conclusions:

1. 48% of the respondents reported that writing has been neglected in the national education from elementary to college and that writing lessons and courses have failed to provide them with writing skill.
2. The majority of them (51%) realize that L1 writing proficiency is a prerequisite of L2 writing proficiency.

3. Reading Sundanese novels has helped them (53%) in writing short stories in English.
4. By writing poems in Sundanese, Indonesian, and English, the respondents (53%) reported that they could appreciate Sundanese literature.
5. Writing poems and short stories in Sundanese is much more difficult for most respondents (77%) than that in English, thus suggesting that they are more proficient in English than in Sundanese.

Due to their cross sectional findings, the surveys above provide us with data about writing instruction related to multiple variables, thus contextualizing writing in the dimension of national education. In other words, the findings represent more or less the present condition of language education, specifically writing pedagogy. The problem with survey findings, however, is that they do not apply to particulars such as the teaching of particular genres of text, how feedback is given and attended to in writing classes, perceived difficulty of writing poems in L1 and L2, etc. The findings of qualitative research on writing will help us understand such cases.

## **HYPOTHESES ABOUT WRITING AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING**

This section proposes major hypotheses about writing and the teaching of writing and elaborates the methodology that has generated the hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Language education has failed to provide pre-college students with fundamentals of academic writing

- Through questionnaires the respondents reported what they learned in high schools and the problems they encountered in writing academic Indonesian and English.
- Through individual and group interviews I found out their experience in learning Indonesian in high schools and their perceived importance of College Indonesian.
- Through document (composition) analysis I identified their weaknesses in writing.

Hypothesis 2: Freshman Indonesian should be focused on developing academic or technical writing

- Through questionnaires the respondents reported the problems they encountered in writing academic Indonesian and English.

- Through individual and group interviews the respondents recommended College Indonesian be redesigned to develop academic writing skills.

Hypothesis 3: The success of teaching academic writing at college levels is dependent on the success of teaching writing at pre-college levels.

- Through observation I noticed that more skilled writers are those who learned better in high schools.
- Through portfolio analysis I noticed some progress of writing over the years (from high school to college years).

Hypothesis 4: Non-Indonesian language lecturers have the potential to be empowered to teach academic writing in non-language departments

- Through national surveys I learned that in general universities do not have enough qualified instructors to teach academic writing.
- Through national surveys, observations, and interviews I noticed that there are some faculty members in non-language departments who have the potential to teach academic writing or College Indonesian and English.
- Through interviews I found out that non-language lecturers showed enthusiasm about teaching academic writing in their own departments.

Hypothesis 5: Ethnic literature-based writing has the potential to revitalize the ethnic literature long neglected in most English departments

- Through document (curriculum and syllabus) analysis I noticed that ethnic literature is understudied in most English departments.
- Through questionnaire the respondents reported underestimating the relevance of ethnic literature with English literature and foreign language literature in general.
- Through interview and observation, I noticed that responding to Sundanese fiction and poems develops a positive attitude toward ethnic literature and inspire them to write.

Hypothesis 6: Collaborative writing, peer reviewing, and teacher-student conferencing are effective for coping with big classes of writing.

- Through questionnaire the respondents reported they became motivated to read and write.
- Through interview and observation, I noticed that peer reviewing has been effective way of correcting students' composition.

- Through interview and observation, I noticed that teacher-student conferencing has been effective for understanding students' difficulties in writing.

Hypothesis 7: Multiple drafting improves the quality of writing.

- Through observation, I noticed qualitative as well as quantitative progress of respondents' writing.
- Through interview, the respondents self-reported making progress in their writing.
- Through document (portfolio) analysis, I identified improvement from draft to draft.

Hypothesis 8: Creative (short story) writing is to be taught earlier than non-creative (expository) writing.

- Through questionnaire the respondents reported they preferred to write short stories first and expository writing second.
- Through observation, I noticed that the respondents are more productive and motivated in writing fiction than non-fiction.

## **TECHNIQUES AND DATA ANALYSIS**

Throughout the studies reported above, I have combined several data collection techniques over the course of the research. By so doing, I could assess the strengths and limitations of each technique and decide if the technique will work with the particular settings for a given study. I have exercised what Goetz and LeCompte have recommended:

*Data collection should be sufficiently comprehensive to address all facets of the research questions and to provide alternative sources of information for confirmation, refinement, or elimination of preliminary findings obtained from a single data source (1984, p. 240).*

The hypotheses listed above are tentative theories based on longitudinal studies of some writing classes. In the following section I will summarize some case studies on writing, focusing on very specific aspects of writing. Focusing on in-depth analysis of a single case or multiple cases, the case study fulfills the following characteristics: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive (Merriam, 1988).

Case 1: The creative process of writing (Alwasilah, 2002)

- Focus: Creative process of writing fiction and poems

- Data obtained: Recorded interview about three respondents' experience, opinion, feelings, and understanding about fiction and poem writing.
- Major finding: Fiction writing is inspired by social life, empirical experience, spiritual experience and critical awareness of multiple resources. Theory of writing can help writers of fiction in many ways: it widens the horizon of thinking and increases knowledge about writing fiction. To learn the theory of writing is not meant merely to read the source of theory, but also to read the products of writing written by experts. For established writers, theory of writing is "worthless" since they have already had those kinds of knowledge in their heads. Novice writers, however, are strongly recommended to read the book on writing theories written by experts.

Case 2: The process of writing academic tasks (Herdiah, 2005)

- Focus: Generating and developing ideas, stages of writing, problems and sources among seven graduate students writing academic writing tasks
- Data obtained: Interview transcripts and notes of observation of academic writing classroom.
- Major finding: The respondent develop ideas using strategies with certain principles: specificity, manageability, curiosity, significance, and familiarity. They go recursively through the basic phases of writing process: prewriting, drafting, and revising. To solve writer's blocks they choose two major strategies: taking a break and reading references.

Case 3: The implementation of conference in the process of writing (Duhita, 2005)

- Focus: Giving feedback through conference
- Data obtained: Notes of observation and transcript of interview with students and teachers and students' compositions.
- Major finding: Conference is essential for developing students' writing skill and for developing teachers' profession. During the conference teachers tend to dominate the conversation due to several reasons such as limited time and dominant cultural values.

Case 4: Collaborative writing instruction in an EFL Classroom (Gunawan, 2002)

- Focus: Process approach to teaching writing at college level
- Data obtained: Field notes of long-term observation, transcripts of interviews, and relevant documents

- Major finding: Collaborative writing classes are effective in two ways: correcting students' mistakes in writing and improving their writing skills since the teaching emphasized writing practice. Upon completion of the course, their writing skills become much better.

Case 5: Intricacies in writing (Syafii, 2001)

- Focus: Students' reactions to peer comments on writing errors.
- Data obtained: Interview transcripts and students' compositions.
- Major finding: Intricate problems in writing include limited knowledge of topics developed, vagueness of ideas expressed, lack of logical sequencing, lack of cohesive development, inadequate knowledge of vocabulary, idioms word form, limited knowledge of grammar. The respondents showed positive attitudes toward peer comments. Their attitudes include cognitive states, emotional states, behavioral states, and appreciative states.

Case 6: Thesis writing (Sugaryamah, 2003)

- Focus: Perceived problems in writing and possible solutions
- Data obtained: Transcript of open-ended interviews on thesis writing: process, problem, and solutions.
- Major finding: In writing the thesis, the six respondents went through the steps of getting started, researching, writing report and doing consultation. They did each stage either recursively or linearly. They encountered two major problems: academic and non-academic or personality factors. The former includes lack of writing skill, reading and analyzing skills, lack of topical or content knowledge, the language, and research method. The latter includes self-control, interaction problems, time management, financial matters, computer problems, busy advisors, unresolved differences between advisors' opinions about topics, and administrative matters.

## DISCUSSION

This section discusses two issues, namely the methodological issues of the findings summarized above and the implications of the research findings for developing tentative theories of teaching College Indonesian.

Principle 1: Different techniques of data collection generate different types of data. In the studies reported here the surveys, despite their thin description, have served to explore the research field and sensitized the researcher of the vast research territory. Variables with high frequency counts could readily become the focus of further inquiry. The fact that most survey respondents believed that writing was the most difficult skill to



acquire, for example, could stimulate researchers to do a case study on particular aspects of writing. Meanwhile, interview and observation data by virtue of their thick description have helped them understand, among others, the intricacies of writing. And what is more, students' writings as authentic documents constitute a hard copy of qualitative findings.

Principle 2: The more data you have the better you triangulate the findings. Triangulation is the banner of qualitative research trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of data is dependent on the degree of triangulation. Research findings grounded on the similar data collected through observation, interview, and document analysis are more constant than those grounded on fragmented data collected through one technique. As Marshall and Rossman (1989, p. 112) put it, "Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data; it builds grounded theory" Through survey, observation, interview, and composition analysis, for example, it was obvious that collaborative writing has improved students' writing skills qualitatively and quantitatively.

Principle 3: The quality of data is not only determined by its collecting techniques, but also by its relevance with research objectives. Qualitative data is messy and unmanageable until it is organized into meaningful categories. In other words, research objectives are the entry point of sorting, categorizing, and finally interpreting data. For describing the creative process of fiction writing as reported above, for example, the demographic information and the number of fiction published is less relevant than psychological processes experienced by the writers. Likewise, information about the unresolved conflict between thesis advisors is less relevant than perceived problems in thesis writing. To be useful data should not only to be triangulated, but also to be consistently and recursively checked against the research objectives stated at the outset of research.

## **OTHER EMERGING HYPOTHESES**

Among the five traditions proposed by Creswell (1998), the studies reported in this paper represent more grounded theory or case study. Findings of biography, phenomenology, and ethnography research could have presented a "close-up" of teaching writing at college level in Indonesia. All the studies above have combined several data collection techniques over the course of the research. As a rule, qualitative research findings generate another set of hypotheses. I believe hypothesis generating indicates augmentation of understanding. Dwelling on the previous research findings reported above, I could identify emerging hypotheses that are well justified to be tentative theories. The theories represent a cumulative

understanding of the findings above and their speculative implications in a wider context. College Indonesian focused on developing academic skills will improve the quality of tertiary education. The ideal College Indonesian should meet the following criteria: (1) practice be emphasized over theory of writing, (2) process be emphasized over product, and (3) needs-analysis be conducted as the entry point for developing teaching materials.

Successful academic writing at college levels presupposes the mastery of basic literacy skills taught in elementary and secondary schools. At both college and pre-college levels of education, collaborative writing, peer-editing, drafting, and teacher-student conferencing are strategies of empowering students to be independent learners and writers. Apparently, writing is an act co-constructed through the active understanding among students as both readers and writers. Collaborative writing workshops are effective for coping with big classes. To be a professional writing instructor, one needs to have a sound understanding of how to teach collaborative writing and—more importantly—demonstrate the capacity to write academic writing him/herself. Thus, both language education specialists and non-language education specialists can do the job provided they meet the criteria.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

The most challenging effort to improve education, perhaps, is to convince the stakeholders who take the existing policy for granted and are pessimistic about innovation to bring any improvement. Most people would definitely agree on the importance of maintaining and teaching Indonesian as the national language. However, only a few would believe that writing has been neglected in our education from elementary to college. As far as curricular policy implementation is concerned, there are two major groups of stakeholders: (1) policy makers and funding agencies, and (2) writing teachers and lecturers. As far as research on writing is concerned, the former is more interested in experimental findings with big-scale claims. On the contrary, the latter is more interested in case-study findings with small-scale claims. In conclusion, both conventional and non-conventional ways of inquiry on writing are equally important and mutually complementary.

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