Academic Writing Students' Perceptions on Teacher Feedback

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Abstract

Academic Writing is a difficult subject for many students because the content requires highly critical academic thinking. Students have to put their ideas to build up arguments. Teachers' role is very important here in giving direct and indirect feedback to help students solve problems in their essays. Students' perceptions of teacher feedback in Academic Writing class is the central focus of this paper. The purpose of the study is to describe Academic Writing students' perceptions of teacher feedback. Data were taken through interviews with six students of the English Language Education Study Program (ELEP), of the Faculty of Language and Arts (FLA) in a private university, in Central Java, Indonesia. They had passed the Academic Writing course at the time the interviews were conducted. The kind of interview that was used in this study is a semi-structured interview. Results showed that some students had positive perceptions of teacher feedback, while some others showed negative perceptions. The results of this study hopefully can be useful for Academic Writing lecturers to know more about what kind of feedback is best to be given to their students, adjusted with their needs.

Key word: students' perceptions, teacher feedback, academic writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing is often considered one of the most difficult aspects of English. According to Afrin (2016), writing is one of the four basic language skills in English, and it takes a major part in learning. At the English department of a private university, in Central Java, Indonesia, students have to take an *Academic Writing* course because it is required to continue to the proposal writing class. It can be said that the Academic *Writing* course is a preparatory class to go to thesis proposal writing. *Academic Writing* is often seen as a difficult course for some students. They often have problems or challenges in this course. *Academic Writing* plays an important role for students. As non-native speakers, students should have good discipline and hard efforts to understand the writing process and how the language is used. Badi (2015) highlights the importance of *Academic Writing* as an important skill for the mastery of the English language.

Some aspects in *Academic Writing* must be understood by students such as generating ideas, paraphrasing, quoting, using formal language, and some other aspects. The students who take *Academic Writing* in a private university, in Central Java, Indonesia sometimes do not know about the standard or level in the course. Some of them think that they will not pass the course because it is too difficult for them. Many students encounter difficulties in the *Academic Writing* course in different ways. To solve the problems, the teacher usually uses teacher feedback as a strategy to make students aware of their mistakes during the writing process. Based on these intriguing facts about *Academic Writing*, we were interested to research this area. We would focus on students' perceptions of teacher feedback in this course.

About teacher feedback, Bijami, Kashef &Nejad (2013) claim that feedback is deliberate to provide an understanding of students' performance. They also add that it helps the students to recreate their knowledge. Hence, feedback has a great contribution to developing

students' writing capability. Since some students believe that teacher feedback can help them to make their writing better, it is necessary to know whether teacher feedback can fulfill students' needs or not. The present study was aimed at describing students' perceptions about teacher feedback in the *Academic Writing* course. Students' perceptions of their teacher feedback thus become the focus of this study. There is one major question to be answered in this study: *What are Academic Writing students' perceptions about teacher feedback*? Some previous studies as discussed in the review of the literature show that teacher feedback both on the content and language of students' essays were useful and students found it a great help to improve their writing.

Pedagogically, this study is hoped to give some contributions in the area of second language writing, particularly in the genre of academic writing. Lecturers reading this piece of study hopefully will gain a better understanding of the positive and negative sides of teacher feedback. *Academic Writing* students are also expected to gain benefits from this study. They are hoped to be able to understand what their teacher means based on the feedback given. Thus, students can deal with their writing problems by understanding and learning detailed comments from the teacher. Hereby, students can improve their writing as well as their grades. As a result, teacher feedback hopefully can help them solve their problems and they can achieve a better grade.

Academic Writing is special among other writing courses. It has its specific features and it represents a different style of writing. It also needs stronger arguments or ideas. Besides that, in *the Academic Writing* course, students are taught about so many writing skills, like paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing, making citations, and some other skills which are necessary to equip them to write. Students also need to support their arguments, which they can derive from theories, statistics, surveys, or relevant experiences. In the *Academic Writing* course, students often face various difficulties. Therefore, they need their teacher's help to minimize or correct their errors.

It is a well-known fact that every teacher has their strategies when dealing with students' errors in writing. One of their strategies is by giving feedback to the students. The feedback is used by the teachers in writing to enhance the students' performance. Feedback is a significant part of the learning process. It seems to be one of the best ways in improving students' writing. Students can be aware of their mistakes through feedback which is given by the teachers.

Academic Writing is considered high-level writing. It requires a process to put the ideas, and the use of formal language. It is expected that the students can contribute something through academic papers. According to Fadda (2012), Academic Writing is a difficult subject for English as a Second Language (ESL) students. She said that the students must gain mastery of grammar, vocabulary and, also, they must master American rhetoric. It means that the students are not supposed to have problems in grammar and structure. Moreover, in *Academic Writing*, students need to think critically, choose the appropriate vocabulary and good grammatical structure. Students also need to share and take many ideas from some journals for their writing. When students work on their academic papers, they must take academic writing standards, genre knowledge, and also social knowledge such as lectures into account. Abdulkareem (2013) mentions that teachers need to initiate and motivate students' behavior towards the basic elements such as definition, strategies, and difficulties. Badi (2015) concludes that academic writing can be a complex process and involve a variety of aspects that are believed to be the base of successful academic writing. He also says that the teacher can help to resolve the problem and find some strategies for students. If the students can pass the *Academic Writing* course, they can have a high motivation to continue in the next level of writing.

One aspect needed in academic writing is teacher feedback. Teacher feedback is the feedback that provides important and detailed information for the students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It means a teacher can evaluate students' mistakes by feedback and students can look at the comments given by the teachers. Feedback can also increase their grade or performance when they succeed in revising their writing. Feedback also can facilitate students' work in writing. Smith and Lipnevich (2008) say that feedback is facilitating achievement to their grade in writing. It means the students always need feedback from the teacher to improve their scores in Academic Writing. However, some students might not be satisfied with the feedback. It means feedback has disadvantages for the students based on their perceptions. According to Hattie & Timperley (2007), the disadvantages of teacher feedback is sometimes still objectionable from students' point of view. The students have difficulties connecting their idea with the teacher's ideas because some of the students have different meanings like putting some ideas into their paragraphs.

Feedback is divided into two activities. The first one is indirect feedback, which means the teacher reads our paper and gives comments through writing. The students read the revision based on the teachers' writing. The second one is direct feedback. It means, we have to make a consultation for the teacher or face to face after the teacher comments about writing. Both of them have advantages and disadvantages. According to Lee (2008), when some students make a mistake, the teacher can help the students by correcting the mistake with direct and indirect feedback. Direct feedback can be given when students do not understand what the comment is about and also when the students made a complex error that is too difficult to explain.

Giving indirect feedback can be done by, for example, adding grammar structures, articles, and punctuation. Similar to Lee (2008), Zhan (2016) reported that the teacher usually provided comments on organization, grammar, and also gave more emphasis on content and vocabulary. It means that any feedback the students need, the teacher can provide it. However, the teachers need to improve their feedback to their students. According to Gul, Tharani, Lakhani, and Ali (2016), the teachers are usually concerned with the grammar and not focus on their content. Sometimes the teachers also give lack detailed comments to the students. It makes the students confused about what they mean in their feedback.

In this writing, the author aims to investigate the benefits of teacher feedback based on students' needs. Some of the students are reluctant to ask questions to the teacher. They prefer asking questions to their friends. However, some of them still believe that teacher feedback can give them specific comments and correct the mistakes in their writing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

From the latter discussion, it can be concluded that Academic Writing students have their own opinions toward the teacher feedback. Thus, a research question is formulated as follows: "What are Academic Writing students' perceptions about teacher feedback?" As the research aims to investigate students' perceptions in Academic Writing class, a quantitative study was performed to address the question. The study focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of the feedback that teachers give to the students.

The study was conducted at the English Language Education (ELE) Program, Faculty of Language and Arts (FLA), in a private university, in Central Java, Indonesia. All participants needed to take an *Academic Writing* course, because at that particular English Language Education (ELE) Program in a private university, in Central Java, it was a necessity before taking Research Design and Research Report courses. All of the participants (6 students) were selected based on their final grades. The students who were selected got an A, AB, B, BC, and

C. The underlying reason is that we wanted to collect the data which were appropriate with students' perceptions about feedback who have a high score, medium score until low score. The participants were those who were taking Academic Writing class because they were accustomed to the teacher's feedback. Hence, it was not difficult for them to give their opinions about teacher feedback. The selected participants were six students of the English Language Education (ELE) Program in a private university, in Central Java, Indonesia. Six Academic Writing students were participating in this study. Those students came from the same batch, which was 2015, and all had attended Academic Writing class and had passed the course.

Regarding the data collection procedures, there were several steps taken. First of all, the data were collected through interviews with six Academic Writing students of 2015 class year at the English Language Education Program in a private university, in Central Java, Indonesia. To make it easier for the participants in answering questions and giving opinions, we used semi-structured interviews, which consisted of six questions and additional questions. After that, we conducted the interview, which consisted of some questions based on what participants' statements about the study. Then, each interview took around 5-7 minutes. The interviews were recorded. The data collection took approximately one week.

After getting data from the interview, the recordings were transcribed. After being transcribed, the data were then analyzed by using the theoretical framework from Lee (2008), when some students have an error, the teacher can help the students by correcting the mistake with direct and indirect feedback.

An interview protocol was used in this research. The interview consists of six questions, which were about students' perceptions of teacher feedback in Academic Writing courses. There were six participants involved in this interview. They were asked to explain their experiences along with their perceptions in Academic Writing class. The interviews were conducted separately at different times. Meanwhile, the type of interview was semi-structured. It means that the questions were provided in the beginning, yet it was possible to have others as follow-up questions. First, the participants were interviewed after an appointment was made. The interview was in Bahasa Indonesia to make the participants fluent and more relaxed to answer the questions during the interview. Afterward, it was recorded using an audio recorder. Lastly, this methodology was used to see the examples of writing anxiety in an attempt to answer one research question: *What are the students' perceptions about teacher feedback in an Academic Writing course*?

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the research obtained from six students of the English Language Education (ELE) Program in a private university, in Central Java, Indonesia. They gave their opinions about teacher feedback in Academic Writing class. This study was set out to find out Academic Writing students' perceptions toward teacher feedback. The results of this study showed that most of the students thought that teacher feedback was necessary for them to help them revise their writing. Furthermore, they also needed detailed comments from the feedback. Elaborated below are the students' perceptions on teacher feedback in Academic Writing class.

Having Grammatical Errors Corrected

The first opinion showed that students had a positive view about teacher feedback because they could have their grammatical errors corrected. Students need to have good grammar, especially those who were from the English Department. However, some of them

occasionally make errors without realizing it. Feedback becomes one of the most important things that could raise students' awareness of mistakes. From the students' perceptions, it was revealed that their teachers mostly gave comments about grammar, vocabulary, and APA format.

Excerpt 1, Student C's statement:

> *"With feedback, we could correct the grammar and make APA format because we would not want to plagiarize and it was important for me."*

Excerpt 2, Student B's s statement:

> *"Sometimes, after the teacher gave feedback, our sentences became acceptable and coherent from the framework."*

Excerpt 3, Student F's statement:

> *"The benefit of feedback was the teacher could give the detail to inform the students about the error of grammar"*

The data showed that Student C needed feedback from the teacher because the student faced difficulty regarding the grammatical structure and APA format. Therefore, Student C wanted the teacher to help her in fixing mistakes in those two aspects. Feedback can improve the students' skills in writing.

Meanwhile, Student F said that the teacher could correct the grammar by giving the missing article in a sentence. The teacher could also point out the improper tenses or other little mistakes for the students to revise. It means that by getting feedback, the student could arrange good sentences. From the two cases above, it could be concluded that teacher feedback could help students in producing better writing.

Improving Students' Writing Skills

Besides that, feedback can improve the students' skills in writing. From the excerpts above, it is clear that many of the Academic Writing students found out that feedback brought positive impacts on their writing. Three of six participants agreed that feedback could help them in correcting their grammatical structures, choosing vocabulary, and formatting their references. According to Brookhart (2008), good feedback contains detailed information for the students therefore to the students can understand what to do next-the cognitive factor. The cognitive factor is a character of a person that can be effective for performance and learning, the factors such as understanding, application, analysis, and evaluation. Based on the theories and students' statements, feedback is a very helpful strategy for students. The result shows that feedback could give benefit for the students to check grammar errors in Academic Writing class.

Getting Good Scores

The second perception from the student participants is that they believed they could get a good score in Academic Writing through feedback because they understood what the teachers wanted. Hence, the participants hoped they could get detailed information through feedback.

Excerpt 4, Student B's statement:

> *"Revision was about giving direction. So we can understand where our error was. The revision was about improving our writing and finally, I could get a good score."*

Excerpt 5, Student D's statement:

> *"Yes. Because when I collected the feedback, there were so many revisions in my feedback and I had to change it."*

Excerpt 6, Student F's statement:

> *"Feedback can influence my score in Academic Writing because feedback can improve my writing better."*

Excerpt 7, Student C's statement:

> *"Yes, feedback could improve our score in Academic Writing because we understood our error."*

Student B said that feedback was like giving direction. Without feedback, the student would lose the way to take an idea. Student D also said a similar thing; feedback could help students to revise all of their grammar errors and increase their grades in writing. Then, Student F argued that feedback could improve their writing skill. In addition, Student C said that feedback could make the students aware of the error.

Based on the data, four out of six students finished Academic Writing with a good score because of teacher feedback. Most of the students believed that feedback could increase their score in Academic Writing because they argued the teachers were mostly experts in writing. If they revised it, the students had to change and followed it. This is in line with Smith's (2008)'s opinion that feedback can provide students with information that can improve their score in writing. He also mentioned that feedback can motivate students to work harder. As a result, most participants got a good score because of the feedback which was given by the teacher. Feedback could influence their score in writing. The findings show that feedback gives the advantage that could increase their writings score in Academic Writing. Most of the participants got a good score in the Academic Writing class.

Some Negative Perceptions toward Teacher Feedback

Despite all the good impacts that teacher feedback had, some students had some negative perceptions about teacher feedback. The main reason was that teacher feedback lacked detailed comments, which influenced clarity and students' understanding. Sometimes teachers only gave short comments and did not explain what the errors were. These students' perceptions are described in Excerpt 8 -11.

Excerpt 8, Student A's statement:

> *"I thought the feedback was not detailed. For example, if we got revision the teacher only gave comments for some points but after we revised it, unfortunately, it was a little bit of error. It seemed like it was confusing and we did not know what the teacher meant."*

Excerpt 9, Student B's statement:

> *"When the feedback was not clear enough such as the teacher just gave the signs like question marks, we were confused. Therefore, we must be active students to ask a question during consultation."*

Excerpt 10, Student D's statement:

> *"The difficulty was we did not know what the teacher wanted. For example, the feedback said that you had to change all of the sentences but after we*

did the revisions, it was not about the sentences but the grammar. Like we had to add article or 's' at the end of the word"

Excerpt 11, Student G's statement:

"The disadvantage of the feedback was not clear enough and sometimes it could lead to misunderstanding between the student and the teacher."

DISCUSSION

Based on the interview result with four out of six students, it is shown that the participants had different perceptions about teacher feedback. Some said that teacher feedback was very useful for them, but some thought that feedback also had disadvantages. Lack of detailed comments and teacher's not explaining the meaning of the signs or codes of the comments became a problem for students. The teachers had to repeat the explanation or the teachers could make a consultation to make the students understand the feedback. According to Lee I (2008), when some students have an error, the teacher can revise it by correcting the mistake with direct and indirect feedback.

Lee (2008) also said that direct feedback refers to teachers correcting the answers in response to student errors. It means direct feedback is when the teacher gives them consultation time. Meanwhile, indirect feedback is when the teacher gives them revision through writing. According to Lee (2004), indirect feedback is provided if there is an indication of the error. Teachers need to indicate error location directly by circling or underlining the errors. Students needed indirect feedback. Furthermore, students also need direct feedback to understand the teacher's comments and fix their errors. If students do not understand the teachers' comments, there can be problems in revising their work.

From Student C, B, and F, it was revealed that teacher feedback could help students improve their grammar. This is in line with what Fadda (2012) states that Academic Writing is a difficult subject for English as a Second Language (ESL) students. She said that the students must gain mastery of grammar, vocabulary and, also, they must master American rhetoric. Teacher feedback is therefore needed to help students make their grammar better.

The fact that teacher feedback is needed to improve students' grammar is also supported by Lee (2008). His statement has been previously cited. When some students make a mistake, teachers can help them by correcting the mistake with direct and indirect feedback. Direct feedback can be given when students do not understand the meanings of certain comments and also when the students make complex errors that are too difficult to explain. The teacher's direct feedback is needed in this case.

Giving feedback can also be done by teachers indirectly. As mentioned in the review of literature, Zhan (2016) claims that teachers usually provide comments on organization, grammar, and also gave more emphasis on content and vocabulary. When students do not understand the meaning of the written comments, then direct feedback can be given.

From the findings, it was also found that Student B, D, F, and C admitted that through teacher feedback, their scores could be better. This is in line with what Hattie and Timperley state. Teacher feedback is the feedback that provides important and detailed information for the students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It means a teacher can evaluate students' mistakes through feedback and students can look at the comments given by the teachers. Feedback can also increase students' grades or performance when they succeed in revising their writing. Feedback also functions to facilitate students' work in writing. Smith and Lipnevich (2008) say that feedback is facilitating achievement to their grade in writing.

Despite the positive sides of feedback that students mentioned, there were also some negative perceptions found in this study about teacher feedback. Students A, B, D, and G admitted that they often found difficulties understanding their teachers' feedback. Some feedback was not detailed, some were not clear. This had the potential to cause misunderstanding and difficulty in interpreting teacher feedback. This case is in line with what Gul, Tharani, Lakhani, and Ali (2016) assert. They think that teachers are usually concerned about students' grammar and are not focused on their content. Sometimes the teachers also lacked detailed comments for the students. It makes the students confused about what they mean in their feedback.

From all the findings, it is shown that all of the students had various perceptions toward teacher feedback. However, there was something to underline; all students needed feedback from their teachers in Academic Writing class. The advantages of the feedback as mentioned by the students are having grammatical errors corrected and getting good scores in Academic Writing because of the feedback received. The students needed clear and detailed feedback. They were very happy to have it but some of the teachers gave vague comments. It is worse when there was a limited time to do a consultation. It is worse when there is not enough time to do the consultation. The students did not have enough time to ask a question related to the feedback. They needed consultation too as much as possible to fix the problem in their writing.

Smith & Higgins (2008) suggested that feedback can achieve good results It means the teacher is also supposed to give motivation from the feedback to the students who have a lower grade in the first draft. Smith explained that if the teacher does not have motivation for students, the grade will impact the students. Moreover, feedback can give motivation for students to achieve a good score in writing. The result shows that feedback also has disadvantages. Most of the participants said that feedback was not clear enough for them. For the suggestion, the teacher can give some footnote or explain with the sentences for the students to make the students understand with the feedback.

CONCLUSION

This paper reports a study that was intended to seek students' perceptions of teacher feedback in Academic Writing class. The feedback was needed because it could improve the students' writing skills. The feedback itself is divided into two parts which are direct and indirect feedback. The direct one is given through consultations. Most participants admitted that they were very glad when the teacher provided time for consultations. It was because they could ask questions if the comments were not clear enough. Meanwhile, indirect feedback is feedback given through written comments. In this activity, the students had some difficulties in understanding what the teacher wanted.

The data results revealed the necessity of detailed comments by all participants. Every type of feedback has positive and negative perceptions for the students. There are three perceptions discussed in the paper. The first one is having a grammatical structure corrected. The data shows that feedback could help students to correct their grammar structure based on the given feedback. The second one is getting good scores because of teachers' feedback. The students could improve their writing after getting the feedback. It was because the students believed that the teachers were mostly experts in writing. Moreover, both students and teachers should work in a team to improve students' writing, because Academic Writing teaches them to continue in the higher level of writing. The last one is about negative perceptions toward the teachers' feedback. Although feedback was viewed positively by most participants, some

students said that teacher feedback had weaknesses, such as short comments and limited time for consultation

This paper has evaluated the usefulness of teacher feedback but also has provided some recommendations. The suggestion for the teachers, they have to give detailed comments with some explanation. If they want to give signs like question marks or underlined words, they have to give a footnote or explain the errors. Furthermore, the teachers should also provide consultations for the students to fix the problem. Lastly, the students are supposed to ask the teacher if they do not understand the comments. All in all, teacher feedback is and will always be needed by students in improving their pieces of writing and enhancing their skills.

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APPENDIX: The list of interview questions

1. Did you take an Academic Writing class?
2. How many times do your teachers give you feedback?
3. What are the benefits of the feedback?
4. Can you improve your grade after getting feedback?
5. What are the disadvantages of the feedback?
6. What are the solutions to the feedback to the teachers?