DEVELOPING EXPERIENTIAL-BASED LEARNING APPROACH TO ENHANCE THE ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

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Abstract

The study aims to elaborate on the use of experiential-based learning to improve the skills of open and distance-learning students in academic writing. Academic writing courses are considered among the most difficult courses for most students. The students, in general, need help with writing the academic article properly. Academic writing requires systematic and proactive for students to complete their academic writing assignments properly. This study used research and development methods to produce academic writing course programs that can distance learners from acquiring skills in academic writing. Nine systematic steps were applied in this study incl, including the identity of instructional goals, conducting instructional analysis, analyzing learners and context, writing instructional objectives, writing performance assessments, determining instructional strategies, conducting formative evaluations, and revising instruction. The results of this research and development study are the academic writing course program used to enhance distance learners' skills in academic writing. The study results indicated that the experiential learning approach to academic writing improves students' ability to write proper academic articles or papers.

Key words: experiential learning, academic writing, open and distance learning

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Academic writing is considered a difficult assignment by most students. At the first stage of the writing the students often face no ideas concerning the theme or topic to write. This will be the mental block to continue their academic writing activities. Most of the students feel afraid to take academic writing courses.

Universitas Terbuka (UT), the state university in Indonesia that implements open and distance learning system offers academic writing as one of the compulsory courses. The students must pass the academic writing course to complete their study program at UT. In fact, there are many students who fail to take the course. UT must find an instructional strategy that can facilitate the students to learn academic writing.

Basically, academic writing is a formal style of nonfiction writing that is primarily used by students, academics, and researchers. It can include everything from student papers to journal articles of scientific studies carried out by professionals. In writing the academic paper the students must do systematic and systemic activities. Academic writing is not about students' personal opinions or experiences. The students must present the facts and evidence in the statements.

In addition, the students must follow a step-by-step process to finish their assignments on writing academic paper. The systematic process of academic writing involves 1) selecting theme or topic to write, 2) determine the tittle of the academic paper, 3) write introduction or background of the paper, 4) conduct literature review, 5) write research method, 6) write and analysis findings, 7) write summary, and 8) write references section.

To succeed in academic writing, the students must have systematic or step-by-step experience in doing academic writing. One of the learning approaches that can be applied to facilitate the students to learn and finish the academic paper is to implement the experiential-based learning approach.

Experiential learning approach is simply defined as the **process of learning by doing**. By engaging in hands-on experiences, the students will be able to connect theories and knowledge. This paper will elaborate on the use of the experienced-based learning in improving the ability of UT students in writing academic paper.

1.2 Research problems

This present study will answer two following research questions 1) How to improve students' engagement in learning academic writing skills? 2) Will the use of experiential learning approach enhance students' ability in academic writing.

1.3 The study purpose

The purpose of the study is to find an effective and efficient learning approach that can be used as an instructional model to facilitate UT students to master the academic writing skills

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Academic writing

Al Badi (2015) notes that academic writing is considered as difficult assignments by most students. It involves a variety of aspects that are believed to be the base of successful academic writing. In addition, Al Fadda (2012) indicates that one of the basics of academic writing is the ability of the learners to access the relevant references and evaluate them in order to put the different ideas and opinions together so that they can develop their own voice.

Academic writing is considered as the most important skills in academic contexts. Writing academic papers is the main method of academic communication. This work is also viewed as the most difficult skill for most students to master. Academic writing is a formal style of nonfiction writing that is primarily used by students, academics, and researchers. It can include everything from student papers to journal articles of scientific studies carried out by professionals.

There are some types of writing that can often be considered as academic writing such as essays, research papers, thesis papers or dissertations, and research proposals. Academic writing has several following essential characteristics such as structured, evidenced, critical, balanced, precise, objective, and formal.

The aim of the Academic Writing course of Universitas Terbuka is to provide academic writing experience and skills for the participants who are enrolled in the Teacher Education Program. The instructional goal of the academic writing course is stated as follows: "… After completing the academic writing course the student will be able to write an academic paper based on their interest and selected topic."

The main objective of writing academic papers is to convey information in a clear, impartial way to the audiences. The academic paper in general consists of arguments that must be based on evidence. In writing the academic paper the writers should have no personal biases or preconceptions. Any statements in the academic paper must be supported by relevant evidence. Basically, the objective of academic writing is to **write and communicate ideas, information and research findings to the wider academic community**. Writing appropriate academic paper requires effective planning, drafting, and revision. Caulfield (2020) noted five basic steps in writing academic paper such as.

Step 1: Pre-writing

Step 2: Planning and outlining

Step 3: Writing a first draft

Step 4: Redrafting and revising

Step 5: Editing and proofreading

Prewriting activities done before start to write draft of academic paper. The students as a writer must generate the idea and topic of academic paper to write. Conducting research regarding the idea and topic to write is also important in writing the academic paper. Research activities before writing the academic paper includes 1) searching for primary and secondary sources, 2) Reading the relevant texts closely (e.g. for literary analysis), 3) Collecting data using relevant research methods (e.g. experiments, interviews or surveys). (Caulfield, 2020).

To write appropriate academic paper, it is important for the students to have planning and write the outline of the academic paper. Planning and outline will guide the students to write academic paper systematically as required in writing the paper. It is difficult for students to write academic paper without planning and proper outline.

Writing the first draft of the academic paper will not be difficult if the students have the proper plan and outline of the paper. Besides, writing an appropriate academic paper also requires clear idea of what to write. The goal of writing the first draft of the academic paper is to complete the idea that must be present in the paper. This first draft will be reviewed and revised to complete the planned academic paper.

The next step of writing the academic paper is to review and revise the first draft. In this step the first draft of the paper is edited to fulfil the requirement of academic writing clarity. One of the criteria of good academic writing is the ability to convey the substance clearly to the target audinces.

2.2   What is experiential learning

Experiential learning is widely recognized and an influential framework that describes how people learn through experience. This theory was developed by David Kolb who noted that learning is the primary process used to navigate life, people can use this process for all forms of learning, development, and change. Learning happens in various settings and continues throughout life. The process of experiential learning supports performance improvement, learning and development.

Kolb's theory of experiential learning describes a learning cycle that consists of four essential processes such as experiencing – reflecting – thinking – acting. These four processes can be depicted in the following diagram.

Figure 1. Experiential learning cycle

Kolb describes the process of a four-step Experiential Learning Cycle as follows:

- Experiencing (Concrete Experience): Learning begins when a learner uses senses and perceptions to engage in what is happening now.
- Reflecting (Reflective Observation): After the experience, a learner reflects on what happened and connects feelings with ideas about the experience.
- Thinking (Abstract Conceptualization): The learner engages in thinking to reach conclusions and form theories, concepts, or general principles that can be tested
- Acting (Active Experimentation): The learner tests the theory and applies what was learned to get feedback and create the next experience.

The main principle of using experiential learning is that classrooms need to be highly engaging for students. It is emphasizing collaboration and cooperation, rather than emphasizing traditional structure. The student must be provided a chance to engage with one another and learn from each other.

In using the experiential learning approach, the students must investigate and ask questions on their own, and require students to be engaged intellectually, socially, emotionally, and physically if necessary. The experiential learning that is personalized to the student often

involves the development of relationships between other students with whom they conduct their investigations.

Students should learn that knowledge does not exist in a vacuum but instead has real world applicability. This fourth stage directly relates to the fifth stage, at which point students need to apply what they've learned. (Loveless,2024).

https://www.educationcorner.com/experiential-learning-guide/

2.3 Online and distance learning

Online learning has been used by many educational institutions in the world. This new approach to teaching promises many advantages both for faculties and students. Online learning is defined from many perspectives. Online learning is defined as a new domain of learning that combines distance education with the practice of face-to-face instruction utilizing computer-mediated communication (Harasim, 2017).

Bakia, et.al. (2012) noted that online learning refers to instructional environments supported over the Internet. Online learning comprises a wide variety of programs that use the Internet within and beyond school walls to provide access to instructional materials as well as facilitate interaction among teachers and students.

As a new mode of teaching and learning, the use of online learning has some characteristics that promise advantages to support effective learning activities. Dull and Sakshi (2017) noted the following advantages of using online learning:

- Accessibility
- Personalised Learning
- Develops cognitive abilities
- Cost-Effectiveness
- Promotes Research
- Basic Computer Skills
- Equal Opportunity for all
- Self-Pacing
- Globalization.

Nevertheless, Dull and Sakshi (2017) also noted the disadvantages of using online learning as follows.

- Poor communication
- Feeling Isolated
- Lack of motivation
- Lack of quality
- Poor accessibility in Remote Areas.

To avoid the disadvantages of using online learning, it is necessary to design and develop the program in advance. The whole components of online learning – instructors, curriculum, students, methods and media, and supporting facilities – must be integrated to ensure that the program works well to enhance learning effectiveness.

Online students benefit greatly from the online learning program in the following ways: (1) because of their connectivity with one another, they can share knowledge and fulfill common goals, which can reduce students' dropout rates; (2) the relationship and interaction between the instructor and learners and among peer learners can increase student performances and their satisfaction of the course; and (3) learners can receive supports and help from their peers, and at the same time they can add their knowledge base through their interactive actions (Yuan & Kim, 2014)

The use of online learning has to engage the students in previously designed and developed learning activities. The students' learning engagement is one of the important factors that determine the success of conducting online learning.

The most powerful instruction is interactive and generative. Interactive instruction actively engages the learner with the resources and learning context to construct new knowledge and skills. Generative instruction, like generative assessment, brings learners with different perspectives together to produce shared understandings. (Jones, B.F. et.al, 1995)

Media and technology, important features of using online learning, can be used to increase students' learning engagement in online learning. Appropriate selection of using media and instructional strategy enables the students to attain the learning outcomes.

Sun and Chen (2016) noted that the effectiveness of online instruction is dependent on well-designed course content, motivated interaction between the instructor and learners, and well-prepared and fully supported instructors. With our thorough analysis of this matter, this study further confirms that teachers definitely and indisputably play a crucial role in online education.

3   RESEARCH METHOD

This present study applied research and development method of Borg, Gall, and Gall (2007). The method adopts the systematic design of instruction model that consist of following nine systematic and systemic stages such as 1) identify instructional goal, 2) conduct instructional analysis, 3) Analysis leaners and context, 4) write performance objectives, 5) develop assessment instrument, 6) develop instructional strategy, 7) develop and select instructional materials, 8) design and conduct formative evaluation of instruction, and 9) revise instruction. This research and development model is divided into three essential parts- design, development, and evaluation.

The first step of implementing the research and development model of this present study is to design the program. In this sense the design is based on the need analysis results regarding the learning problems faced by students in learning academic writing. The blueprint of the program was the result of the design part of the study.

The blueprint describes learning goals, tutorial content, learning objectives, instructional method and strategy, performance assessment, and instructional material. The blueprint was used as a guideline for developing materials of online tutorial to be implemented in the academic writing program. In the development part of the study the online learning and program academic writing was produced based on the blueprint or design. The evaluation part of this present study is also called the research part of the study.

The study used the formative evaluation model of Dick, Carey, and Carey (2018) that consists of three systematic procedures – one-to-one, small group, and field trial evaluation. Concerning time and research budget this present study only implementing one-to-one and small group of the formative evaluation phases. The procedure of the research and development procedures of the study can be summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Research and development procedures

Research and development part	Steps of research and development	Description
Design	Identify instructional goal	The result of this design part is the blueprint or instructional design of the academic writing course program that includes instructional goal, learning content or
	Conduct instructional analysis	
	Analyze learners and context	
	Write instructional objectives	

	Write performance instrument	substance, learning method and strategy, learning materials, assessment instrument. This blueprint was used as guidelines to produce the program.
	Develop instructional materials	
Development	Develop instructional materials	Producing of online learning materials and programs of the Academic Writing online tutorials for distance learners
Evaluation	Conduct formative evaluation and revise the program	Conducting one-to- one and small group formative evaluation to find program weaknesses to be revised

3.1   Results of the study

The results of the study indicated that implementing experiential learning facilitated the students to complete the assignments in writing academic paper. The descriptions of the results in this present study follow the systematic steps of the research and development.

In analysis phase the collected data showed that all students have no experience and unable to write an academic paper. The students need real process and experience in writing the academic paper.

The results of the design phase of this research and development study was an instructional plan or blueprint of the online tutorial program that implement the experiential based learning approach. The blueprint of the program described the instructional goals, learning objectives, instructional method and strategy, learning materials, and assessment instrument. The design or blueprint will be used as guidelines for developing and producing the content of the online tutorial program. The design phase of the study involves subject matter expert, instructional designer, and media specialist.

The program and the online learning materials was developed in this phase of the research and development study. The contents and learning materials of the online tutorial program that

implemented the experiential-based learning approach was the results of this development phase.

The contents or substance of the experiential-based online tutorial program consists of learning module and presentation materials that can be used facilitate the students to attain the stated learning goal - after completing the online learning of the experiential-based tutorial program the students will be able to write a research journal based on their topic interest.

Formative evaluation step was implemented at the end of the research and development method of this study. One-to-one formative evaluation with three different students was applied to get the data regarding the major weaknesses of the initial draft of the online tutorial program of the academic writing. One-to-one formative evaluation results indicated that the program has several components that should be revised such as the instructional strategy and learning materials that would be used in the program.

The academic writing program must provide students the students with systematic exercises and assignments that reflects the structure and components of the academic paper - tittle, abstract, backgrounds, literature review, research method, study results, summary, and reference. Scaffolding method was used to guide the students learning process to complete the assignments of writing the academic papers.

Pre and post-test session was applied to get information of the students gained score of the studying the online learning experiential-based approach in writing the academic paper.

The statistical significance by comparison of the pre- test and post-test results in a p-value of less than 0.01, below the alpha value of 0.05; it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between pre and post-test session score of the participant. With the significant level of $p < 0.05$, the statistical analysis indicates that there is significant improvement between the pre-test and the post-test of the participants' scores. It can be concluded that the experiential learning approach was able to facilitate students to write the academic paper of given assignments.

4 SUMMARY

The appropriate learning approach must be applied to facilitate students learning achievement. One of the learning approaches that can be used to facilitate students learning process to master the skills of the academic writing is the experiential learning approach. The use of experiential learning provides the students with authentic learning procedures to master the skills of the

academic writing. Implementing the experiential learning enables the students to complete the academic writing assignments through hands on learning activities.

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