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CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN WRITING ENGLISH ACADEMIC PAPERS: A GRADUATE STUDENT'S SELF-REFLECTION

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Abstract
Writing academic papers in English is complex and daunting. However, many students are able to face the difficulties and find appropriate solutions to tackle the problems, one of which is through a self-reflection. This study aims at extending the literature by focusing on one student's self-reflection that was carried out during the learning process in one academic writing class in a master's program in Applied English Linguistics. The reflection centred upon the feedback given on all assignments given in the first half of the semester. The reflective notes were analysed qualitatively. Findings demonstrated that the participant's most salient problems included incorporating the academic convention into her writing, understanding and using terminologies in Applied English Linguistics, and using appropriate syntax. To deal with the challenges, she used both direct and indirect language learning strategies, namely correcting her assignments based on the teacher's feedback, communicating the writing problems with the teacher, writing other classroom papers in English directly, and making self-correction using an AI-based tool. The participant's learning strategies were made on the basis of her self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulation. The study recommends the incorporation of self-reflection into academic writing class to develop students' academic writing skills.

Keywords: academic writing, learning strategy, reflection, self-efficacy, self-regulation

Introduction

Students enrolling in a master's study program that uses English as a medium of instruction often found academic writing very challenging and sometimes doubt their English writing skill competence (Ngoc & Ngoc, 2021). On the one hand, they realize that writing skills are very essential since most assignments require them to write papers in English (thesis included). On the other hand, many of them are not accustomed to writing essays or academic papers in English (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020), especially when it is not a mandatory in any of their present activities, e.g., their jobs. Similarly, the first author has been on a hiatus in academic writing and have just returned to university after obtaining her bachelor's degree several years

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ago. Although she works in a school that uses English as a medium of instruction, as a teacher's assistant she is not required to write many reports in English, let alone academic papers. She uses English for merely conversations, giving oral instructions and explanations.

As a first-semester student of one master program in Applied English Linguistics, she views the significant role of an Academic Writing for Scholarly Publications (henceforth, AWSP), a class offered by the program for improving writing skills. In this class she learned writing strategies, including how to use formal words in sentences, and construct paragraphs in academic writing style format. The topics discussed in this class ranged from words to sentences and paragraphs, and conventions in academic research articles.

However, doing the class assignment and learning the materials seem to be insufficient for her to develop her writing skills - she felt the need to recognize her strengths and weaknesses, and learned from both so she could identify the most appropriate learning strategies for this class and can take advantages of such knowledge for her writing skills improvement. At the same time, another course that she took which was taught by the second author, i.e., the Approaches to English Language Learning (henceforth, AELL), required the students to write a self-reflective paper about their' learning process in the study program. To deal with both the need in AWSP class and the requirement of the AELL class, the first author decided to do a self-reflective study of her learning strategies in the former. She wrote a reflective journal, which is a method that individuals engage with their experiences to enhance their understanding of their professional growth and development (Alt, Raichel, & Naamati-Schneider, 2022). There, she reviewed her assignments, sought improvement, and understood her growth. Hence, the focuses of her reflection were examining challenges and strategies in learning the English academic writing skills in AWSP class and her reflection upon the experiences.

Method

The first author did her self-reflection upon her learning experience in the AWSP class. A summary of the class is as follows. In the first two weeks of the AWSP class, the learning focused on the strategies to write formal sentences, use proper diction, introduce terminologies, and combine sentences for academic papers. In the next 3 weeks the class learned about the strategies of constructing paragraphs. Weekly assignments should be submitted in the same week. To carry out her self-reflection, she used a weekly reflective journal, in which she wrote down what the class learned in the class, what she did for the assignments, her feelings, any difficulties related to learning that she encountered, as well as her personal responses to the teacher's feedback and what she has learned from all the activities, assignments, and feedback.

The diaries' words, phrases, or metaphors were used to analyse and identify the reflective points and produce the dimensions of her reflection (Alt, Raichel, & Naamati-Schneider, 2022). She used several questions (see Figure 1) as a trigger for doing the reflection (Alt & Raichel, 2020). The journaling took five weeks September 5th, 2022, until October 19th, 2022. in the weekends. She spent approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour writing her reflections (for example, analysing which parts of the assignments that she did well and still lacked). Then, when she received the teacher's feedback for the assignments, she made some corrections.

Doing this, she could learn from her mistakes, avoid doing the same mistakes in the following weeks and in other courses where she had to write academic papers. Lastly, she wrote her feelings and thoughts about the teacher's comments and feedback.

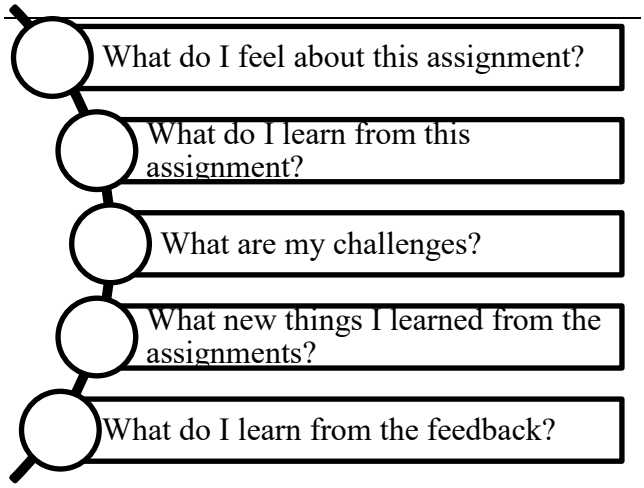


Figure 1. List of questions guiding the writing of the reflective journal

Findings and Discussion

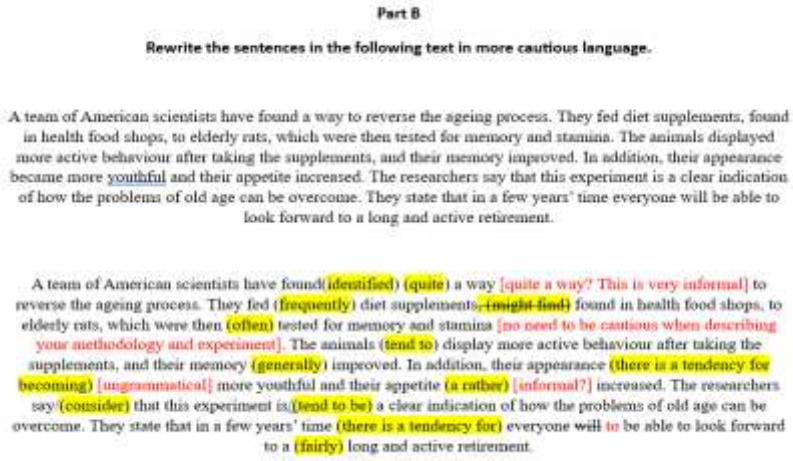
This section presents the centre of the first author's reflection, namely the problems she encountered during the learning process in the AWSP class, how she overcome those problems, and what knowledge she has constructed so far as a result of and throughout the reflection process.

Challenges in doing the assignments

Throughout the five weeks in the AWSP class, she found several challenges, i.e., consistent use of academic writing style, lack of knowledge of the terminologies in Applied Linguistics, writing grammatically accurate sentences, and organizing ideas in paragraphs.

Using academic convention consistently

In several assignments, the class was asked to rewrite incorrect sentences so that they fit into the academic style. After doing the assignments and receiving feedback from the teacher, she was aware that she did not use academic style and write grammatically accurate sentence consistently. For example, she often used informal word, for example, *quite a way* or abbreviation where she should not, for instance, *etc*., which is part of the convention of academic writing (see Figures 1 and 2). This is similar to the problems of other Indonesian post-graduate students in Lesmana and Ariffin's (2020) study. They found that their research subjects were not familiar with the conventions in academic writing and found it difficult to deliver their messages well in formal style because of their lack of grammatical, syntax, and vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Bakhou and Bouhania (2020) identified some challenges such as limited academic writing knowledge and skills in producing well-written academic output.



Part B

Rewrite the sentences in the following text in more cautious language.

A team of American scientists have found a way to reverse the ageing process. They fed diet supplements, found in health food shops, to elderly rats, which were then tested for memory and stamina. The animals displayed more active behaviour after taking the supplements, and their memory improved. In addition, their appearance became more youthful and their appetite increased. The researchers say that this experiment is a clear indication of how the problems of old age can be overcome. They state that in a few years' time everyone will be able to look forward to a long and active retirement.

A team of American scientists have found(identified) (quite) a way [quite a way? This is very informal] to reverse the ageing process. They fed (frequently) diet supplements, ~~(might find)~~ found in health food shops, to elderly rats, which were then (often) tested for memory and stamina [no need to be cautious when describing your methodology and experiment]. The animals (tend to) display more active behaviour after taking the supplements, and their memory (generally) improved. In addition, their appearance (there is a tendency for becoming) [ungrammatical] more youthful and their appetite (a rather) [informal?] increased. The researchers say (consider) that this experiment is (tend to be) a clear indication of how the problems of old age can be overcome. They state that in a few years' time (there is a tendency for) everyone ~~will~~ to be able to look forward to a (fairly) long and active retirement.

Figure 1. A screenshot of teacher's feedback for the part where informal words were used

3. Write an extended definition for each terminology.
a. Ethnicity is a social political group which differentiates based on their language, religion, and other cultural attributes and apart from physical appearance such as hair, skin color etc. ??? A few ethnicities in USA are African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American and European American.

Figure 2. A screenshot of teacher's feedback for using abbreviation inappropriately

By reading and rereading the mistakes she made and the teacher's feedback and reflecting upon them (see Excerpts 1 and 2), she then realized that using formal language was not automatic. Rather, it has to be internalized until she acquired the academic writing skills. This reminds her of the 'Monitoring' of the Monitor Hypothesis due to the 'learning' process in Krashen's Five Hypotheses of Language Acquisition (1982 as cited in Lan & Wei, 2019). Though Krashen used the L2 spoken production as the context, and this hypothesis has been criticized because of its lack of empirical evidence (McLaughlin 1987 as cited in Lan & Wei, 2019, p. 1462), she felt that every time she reminded herself of using adopting the writing convention, she activated her 'Monitoring' as she focused on the appropriate form and possessed enough time to choose which grammatical item she had to use and grammatical rule she had to adopt, although she may have not mastered all the important language rules needed to produce a decent academic paper.

From this thing, I learned it was better to avoid using adverbs in academic writing. However, I was not surprised when I looked Bu Rina comment in assignment 1 & 2 in part B which was related to paragraph. The comment such as "ungrammatical" and "informal" honestly, I felt discouraged and anxious. I also still wrote "quite way", "a rather" which is still not formal word and it is a colloquial words. I was aware that my English was not perfect and what people said as "broken English". In daily life, I used mixed with English and Indonesia. If I

Excerpt 1. Week #1 self-reflective journal about using ungrammatical structure.

After I submitted the work, I notice that I should have change etc à bu Rina had explained better to avoid writing etc. Probably if I could have chance to correct I would write, physical appearance such as hair and skin color. First things to do is I chose the concept that I understand well, then try to define it with my own words.

Excerpt 2. Week #3 self-reflective journal about using abbreviation

Understanding new terminology in applied English linguistics

In another task, students were asked to make 20 sentences using conjunctions, and the sentences should be related to terminologies in Linguistics or Applied English Linguistics. Since the first author's previous major was Psychology, the terms in the above two fields were new to her, and created a problem in the writing process, especially because there was a deadline for every assignment (see Excerpt 3). Such problem was not shared by her classmates who had English literature or English educational background. Findings of Katajamäki's (2020) study showed that the above matter was also shared by other tertiary students in their learning process. Nevertheless, she was aware that the above challenges should not be a personal excuse before the teacher. As a matter of fact, she decided to learn and understand the new terms fast so that she could create meaningfully appropriate sentences for the assignments. In other words, she had to learn both new content and writing skills at the same time, quickly.

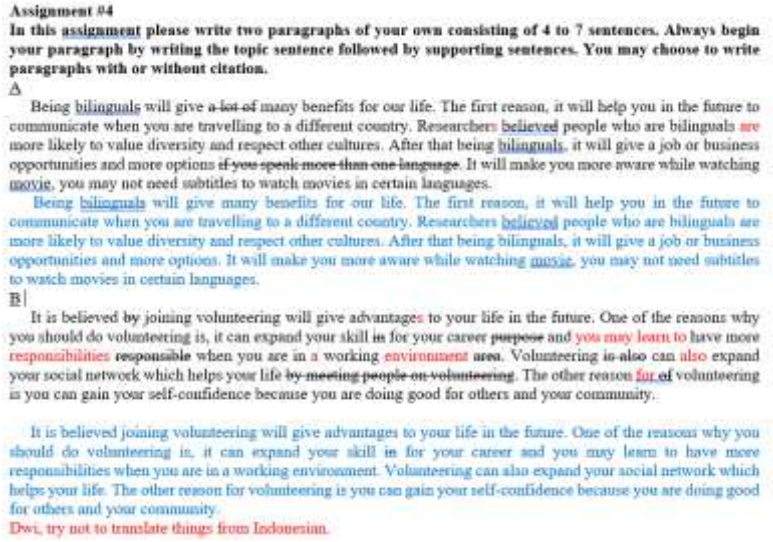
knowledge, I got during these 2 weeks. My background was psychology and linguistics was a new field to me. I tried to open my note from the matriculation class, and it was not helping. I decided to pick from my note in sociolinguistics class. It was very difficult, and I struggled to find the sentence and I was running out the time until the submission time. I just searched and copy paste

Excerpt 3. Week #2 self-reflective journal about feelings related to the sentence production task

Using appropriate syntax

Still, another assignment asked the class to revise sentences with inaccurate structure. This task did not seem difficult at first, so the first author followed the instruction and rewrote those inaccurate sentences. However, when she read and reread them, she could not understand them at all because of the mistakes she made at the word and sentence level, which were common problems of Indonesian EFL learners when producing academic papers (see for example, Febriani, 2022; Lesmana & Ariffin, 2020). Indeed, previous research has found that lack of accurate and various English syntactic patterns resulted in English learners' confusion and frustration of when composing essays in English (Febriani, 2022). In addition, the habit of writing in Indonesian first then translating in English has resulted in unusual sentence structure. This may be a tendency among Indonesian master students who are not highly competent in English, as investigated in Lesmana and Ariffin's (2020) study. The teacher's advice is not to translate sentences from Indonesian to English and write in English directly instead (see Figure 3) made her

realize that she needed to understand the English syntactical rules and patterns and implement her understanding by directly writing in English.



Assignment #4

In this assignment please write two paragraphs of your own consisting of 4 to 7 sentences. Always begin your paragraph by writing the topic sentence followed by supporting sentences. You may choose to write paragraphs with or without citation.

A

Being bilinguals will give ~~a lot of~~ many benefits for our life. The first reason, it will help you in the future to communicate when you are travelling to a different country. Researchers believed people who are bilinguals are more likely to value diversity and respect other cultures. After that being bilinguals, it will give a job or business opportunities and more options ~~if you speak more than one language~~. It will make you more aware while watching movie, you may not need subtitles to watch movies in certain languages.

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B

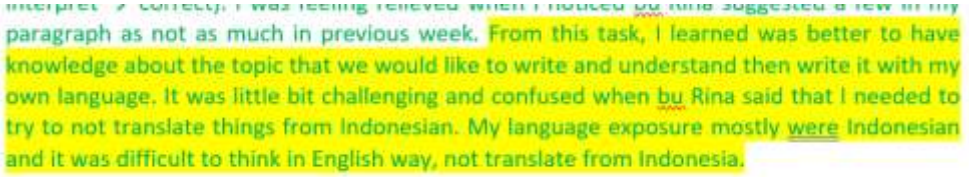
It is believed ~~by~~ joining volunteering will give advantages to your life in the future. One of the reasons why you should do volunteering is, it can expand your skill ~~in~~ for your career ~~purpose~~ and you may learn to have more responsibilities ~~responsible~~ when you are in a working environment ~~area~~. Volunteering ~~is also~~ can also expand your social network which helps your life ~~by meeting people on volunteering~~. The other reason ~~for of~~ volunteering is you can gain your self-confidence because you are doing good for others and your community.

It is believed joining volunteering will give advantages to your life in the future. One of the reasons why you should do volunteering is, it can expand your skill in for your career and you may learn to have more responsibilities when you are in a working environment. Volunteering can also expand your social network which helps your life. The other reason for volunteering is you can gain your self-confidence because you are doing good for others and your community.

Dwi, try not to translate things from Indonesian.

Figure 3. Teacher's feedback about translating Indonesian sentences into English

The above teacher's feedback also made her notice that it was challenging for herself to understand and accept the teacher's comments with regards to her writing habit, i.e., pouring her ideas and drafting in Indonesian and translating them (see Excerpt 4), especially when she thought that was the only way that she could write in English. As a matter of fact, research has also found that the use of machine translation could help students make a correction of linguistic errors, particularly articles and prepositions (see for example, Lee & Briggs, 2020) and assist non-English majors to revise their English essays (Tsai, 2020). Nevertheless, she was aware that even though she had non-English major, her present major is Applied English Linguistics, and she needs to be able to be fluent writer (of the classroom research papers and thesis). Thus, she decided to change her habit gradually until she reached a point where she does not have much reliance on a machine translation.



interpret ? correct). I was feeling relieved when I noticed bu Rina suggested a few in my paragraph as not as much in previous week. From this task, I learned was better to have knowledge about the topic that we would like to write and understand then write it with my own language. It was little bit challenging and confused when bu Rina said that I needed to try to not translate things from Indonesian. My language exposure mostly were Indonesian and it was difficult to think in English way, not translate from Indonesia.

Excerpt 4. Week #3 self-reflective journal about translating from Indonesian to English

Strategies to solve the challenges

From the challenges above and her learning experience, she needed to find strategies to overcome the challenges. The solutions that she worked out include making revisions based on the teacher's feedback, communicating with the teacher, practicing writing in English directly in other classes, and doing self-corrections with the help of an AI-based tool.

Making revisions based on the teacher's feedback

The teacher's feedback was helpful because it helped her learn about her mistakes and how to revise her own writing although some of the feedback made her feel anxious and took some time to understand. However, at some point afterwards, she realized that she needed to properly understand the teacher's feedback to improve her writing then and, in the future, as has been proved in Gan, An, and Liu's (2021) study. Making revision needs a feedback literacy, "which concerns learners' understanding and evaluation of feedback information and of self-regulated learning" (Yu & Liu, 2021, p.1). One simple step is by marking all the mistakes or errors that she made (see Excerpt 5). Furthermore, she noticed from the teacher's feedback that writing complex sentences in English was her weakness. So, a simple tip is to make simple but understandable sentences first, rather than complex but difficult to understand sentences. Moreover, she consulted the reference books or course materials. That way, she made herself understand her mistakes or errors, evaluate them, and avoid the same mistakes in her future papers. The steps that she took agree with Ellis' (2016) suggestion that students who faced difficulties with the form of the second language need to focus on linguistic elements to understand and notice the incorrect forms that they produce.

I tried to reproduce and rewrite the wrong sentence and words which Bu Rina gave the correct answer and feedback in blue ink so in the future I could refer to that example. It helped me a lot to understand and how to write the grammatical sentence in this task. Hopefully, I will produce more correct sentences in grammatical form. According to the feedback, I learned that I needed to study in writing English to be more grammatical.

Excerpt 5. Week #1 self-reflective journal about revising task based on teacher's feedback

Communicating with the teacher as an expert

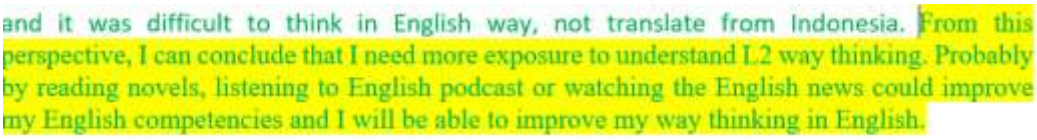
From the assignments given in the second week, she learned that she needed to communicate the challenges she faced (for example, understanding new terminology in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics and sentence structure) to the teacher, which has caused her some anxiety in the process of writing. She expected that her teacher would understand her anxiety and could provide her with some solutions. She was grateful that the teacher was willing to help her deal with her problems by giving more explanation and supporting readings. Such support has helped her build her confidence to do the next assignments and assisted her overcoming her anxiety gradually. As Patra, Alazemi, Al-Jamal, and Gheisari (2022) addressed, teacher's written, and verbal feedback could help students deal with anxiety in writing. Similarly, Yu and Liu (2021) recommended that teacher-student dialogical feedback and compliments to students' paper, as well as students' understanding of the assessment rubric along with the student's reflection played a major role in the positive use of the feedback for the student's academic writing improvement.

Practicing writing directly in English in other classes

She found that reading research papers in English in other classes has assisted her in some way to write essays or drafts. She learned about the organization of those texts, the diction, the vocabulary, the style, and the syntax. Throughout the

reading process, she also tried to establish a habit of thinking and writing directly in English and not in Indonesian first (see Excerpt 6). She could see that the more she practiced writing the reflective journal in the AELL class and revise it following the teacher's comments, the more it helped her solve her challenges above and this is in line with Yu and Liu's (2021) findings on the role of reflection of teacher's feedback to create better academic paper.

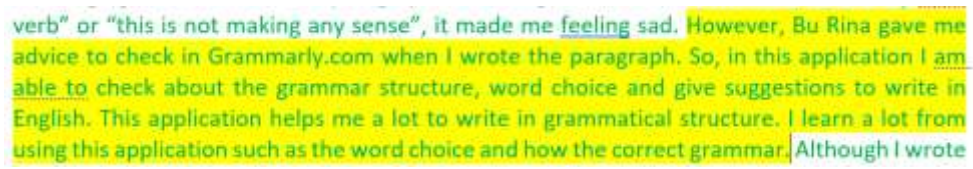
Despite the above effort, she had to admit that thinking and writing directly in English was not as easy as she thought. She decided that she had to be realistic. Therefore, in the initial steps of changing her writing habit, she would use Indonesian language as a bridge to help her produce the English sentences, which lends support to translanguaging pedagogy, referred to as "the use of different planned strategies based on activating students' resources from their whole linguistic repertoire" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022) including the use of a translation machine, and code-meshing in, for example, brainstorming, outlining, drafting and revising her papers. More than that, she needed more practice writing and reading journals, novels, and news in English to expand her vocabulary and be accustomed to the English structure and vocabulary (at least) in academic papers (see Excerpt 6). These strategies may help her to acquire the academic writing skills.


and it was difficult to think in English way, not translate from Indonesia. From this perspective, I can conclude that I need more exposure to understand L2 way thinking. Probably by reading novels, listening to English podcast or watching the English news could improve my English competencies and I will be able to improve my way thinking in English.

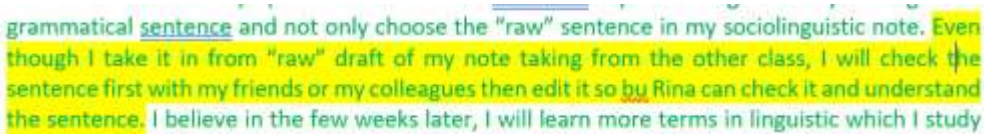
Excerpt 6. Week #3 self-reflective journal about expanding vocabulary

Making self-correction with the help of an AI-based tool

When doing the Week #4 assignments, she felt more comfortable and confident because it was related to writing a paragraph, and she had prior knowledge regarding constructing paragraphs. Besides that, the teacher suggested to use Grammarly to check the spelling, grammar, and word choice after she constructed sentences (see Excerpts 7 and 8). Several studies have recommended the integration of Grammarly into academic writing assessment system because of the efficiency and effectiveness it offers in the process of academic writing (see for example, Calma, Cotronei-Baird, & Chia, 2022; O'Neill & Russell, 2019). Factually, using Grammarly has widened her perspective of the writing process, i.e., to check, recheck, revise, and edit her work carefully before submission. From that on, she always used this application to check the grammatical accuracy and word choice. However, she realizes that despite the use of this tool, she still has to make decisions on the suggestions offered by the tool, as suggested in Zuhriah, Fatoni, Putri, and Zainuddin's (2024) findings and should not rely too much on the tool because it had some limitations, as it lacks of in-depth and constructive feedback (Ha & Ho, 2025) and it does not replace the thinking process and construction of knowledge in and through the writing process (Zinkevich & Ledeneva, 2021).


verb" or "this is not making any sense", it made me feeling sad. However, Bu Rina gave me advice to check in Grammarly.com when I wrote the paragraph. So, in this application I am able to check about the grammar structure, word choice and give suggestions to write in English. This application helps me a lot to write in grammatical structure. I learn a lot from using this application such as the word choice and how the correct grammar. Although I wrote

Excerpt 7. Week #4 self-reflective journal about using Grammarly.com to assist herself checking grammar and word choice of her paragraphs


grammatical sentence and not only choose the "raw" sentence in my sociolinguistic note. Even though I take it in from "raw" draft of my note taking from the other class, I will check the sentence first with my friends or my colleagues then edit it so bu Rina can check it and understand the sentence. I believe in the few weeks later, I will learn more terms in linguistic which I study

Excerpt 8. Week #4 self-reflective journal about Using Grammarly.com

Reflective points

From those challenges and strategies above, the first author realized that the learning strategies that she used are contextual and in line with the problems that she encountered (Oxford, 2017 as cited in Pawlak, 2021). She has combined the direct and indirect learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) to improve her English writing skills, on the basis of self-efficacy and self-regulation, as will be explain in the following subsections.

Direct strategies

The reflection she made taught her that she has used the direct strategies, particularly the compensation and cognitive strategies (Oxford 1990), namely communicating her problems with the teacher, from whom she obtained helpful and useful feedback. This lends support to Fitriyah, Ningrum, and Gozali's (2024) as well as Gan, An, and Liu's (2021) findings about how teacher's constructive feedback and interaction with the students could have a positive impact to their learning motivation. The same study also points out the importance of student's feedback literacy to make use of the teacher's feedback for their academic essays' improvement. Nevertheless, she realized that receiving feedback alone was not enough. Feedback needs and must be responded through making revisions, including doing intensive reading for the AWSP class and other classes. Hence, the use of cognitive strategies, i.e., through which she used her learned skills to manage and apply the knowledge about academic writing skills in writing papers for other classes.

Indirect strategies

Conducting a self-reflection through reflective journal has been helpful and beneficial for the first author, particularly as means of reducing negative affective factors in learning. For example, she often felt anxious reading the teacher's feedback concerning the grammatical and syntactical errors as well as the inappropriate way of introducing terminology. It is stated that emotion could have an impact on the learning process, which could boost their motivation to study. Nevertheless, by letting the negative feeling out when writing the journal, she somehow could 'see' it, created a distance with it, and used it as an encouragement to pay more specific attention to the grammatical and syntactical aspects and ways of introducing terminologies in academic papers. Research has proved that

students' self-reflection provided a positive effect to their writing quality (see for instance, Gebremariam & Hiluf, 2023). In addition, other evidence showed that student's self-reflection on the teachers' feedback and the writing tasks can be an indication of their self-efficacy, as has been proved by Wei, Cheong, Zhu and Lu (2022) and may signal long-term reflection habit that can be connected to professional development (Alt, Raichel, & Naamati-Schneider, 2022).

Self-efficacy and self-regulation

The reflection has led the first author to a heightened awareness of the significant role of self-efficacy and self-regulation in her learning process throughout the AWSP and AELL courses, and particularly the former course. The above learning experience that she has shared above have supported Mickwitz and Suojala's (2020) findings that students' self-regulatory skills (mirrored in her willingness and capability to lead, control and be ready with any unexpected happenings in her learning process) and self-efficacy (her belief that she could do any tasks given successfully-within her capability) were more effective in the process of learning academic writing skills in the traditional learning contexts where teachers' support is more available, then in the independent context. She views that the way of understanding and perceiving the conventions of academic writing is not only through doing all the assignments but also discerning her weaknesses and strengths and communicating them with her teacher. Further, she needs a dialogic learning process where she gives herself chances to reflect upon her learning experiences. In the long run, both the self-efficacy and self-regulation skills will help her become a resilient student who is ready for more challenging academic writing task, such as thesis writing (Wijaya, 2021).

Conclusion

To sum up, the paper has reported the reflection upon the challenges that were encountered in an academic writing class, and the solutions taken to overcome them. Self-efficacy belief and self-regulation skills have driven the identification of the problems, namely adopting academic convention consistently, using new terminologies in Applied English Linguistics, and using appropriate syntax, which were solved through addressing teacher's feedback in making corrections, communicating the problems with the teacher, writing papers of other classes in English directly, and making self-correction using an AI-based tool. The findings of the study implies that self-efficacy and self-regulation skills are two important psychological factors in learning that need to be internally activated by students and externally addressed by teachers in giving oral and written support to their students. The study is limited to one participant only and hence restricts its generalization. Future studies can focus on involving the class's self-reflection into academic writing courses as well as comparing students' and teachers' self-reflection throughout the learning and teaching process of the academic writing subject.

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