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SHAPING RESEARCH PROBLEMS: UNDERSTANDING EFL STUDENTS' VOICES ON THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PROJECT

Teuku Zulfikar

Ar-Raniry State Islamic University, Banda Aceh, INDONESIA

Email: teuku.zulfikar@ar-raniry.ac.id

Abstract

Writing a thesis is an important pre-requisite for students to graduate. All higher education institutions in Indonesia, and some overseas implement this policy, in which students in their senior years are obliged to write a minor if not a major research project. However, shaping research is challenging and difficult as well, especially for undergraduate students, and this article therefore explores EFL students' voices on complexities in their attempt to shape their research project and develop research proposal, and causes of their complexity. This article also identifies how students' generate their research problem. To answer these inquiries, ten student-teachers in the department of English Education, Ar-Raniry State Islamic University were interviewed to understand their complexities in shaping their research project; their perceived solutions for the complexities; and their sources of ideas in generating research problem. In addition, their proposals were also reviewed to explore more in depth on their ways of developing their research project. The study identifies the nature of students' complexities and factors leading to their difficulties. Most students agree that reflecting on own experience and consulting lecturers are the best way to generate ideas. They also suggest that starting building up the argument is the most challenging part in their attempt to shape research project. Finally, the study also reveals that the best way to solve those complexities is through engaging in constant writing practices.

Key words: *Research problems, thesis development, research project.*

INTRODUCTION

A research project is an important requirement for university students to graduate. It is for this reason that all university students are required to write a research project in their senior year. To help these students write their research project, universities offer three courses of research methodology. For example, at faculty of education and teacher training, UIN Ar-Raniry, students are required to take three core research subjects: research methodology, English language research (ELR) I and II. These subjects are offered to enable students engage in research activities. However, majority of students find it difficult to write their research paper. Their most common difficulties are in the process of identifying research problems and spotting sources of their problems, and in fact, most non-native researchers find it difficult to develop their research problems (Murray, 2011; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007).

In my ELR class, for instance, I am aware of this issue, in which my students find it difficult to understand the nature of research problem. They in fact fail to understand that research problem has multifaceted meanings (Griffiee, 2012; Lipson, 2005); it can be seen from multiple angles and

spots (Tarozzi, 2013). Research problem is defined as a phenomenon needs answering. It entails various topics and issues; they could be either negative or positive (Mckay, 2006). For example, researchers may regard the application of information-communication technology (ICT) in education as the main feature of modern educational system; and thus they perhaps take this issue as the topic of their academic inquiry. In the other instance, students could also consider to investigate the successful practices of a particular institution and explore factors leading to its success stories (see Wilkey, 2013).

While understanding of the research problem is the first source of students' difficulties in writing their research project, spotting research problem is another challenge for novice researchers, such as undergraduate students. Some of them seem to be confused upon determining sources of research problem; and it is observable in my own classes. In finding research problems, researchers could refer to many different sources. They may discuss with their colleagues or mentors on appropriate research problems (Griffiee, 2012). Researchers could also consult journal articles to seek issues unresolvable in literature, and thus allow them to start their new inquiry to fill the gap of the previous studies.

Griffiee (2012) also argues that different level of researchers will have different approaches in generating their research problem. For instance, less experienced researchers (LERs), tend to consult their professors for research ideas. During their courses, for instance, students would perhaps take issues emerging during their discussion in class to be their research problems. Some LERs also choose to consult their colleagues or read books or textbooks to get their research problems. However, high experienced researchers (HERs) take different directions in generating research problems. For instance, the majority of HERs generate ideas through engaging in seminars, workshops and conferences. HERs often review previous studies and identify important gaps.

In addition, problematizing research problem or commonly known as 'problem statement' is also a challenge for novice researchers. The failure to state research problems leads to researchers' incapability to develop their research project. It is therefore timely to investigate these issues in this current study, as its finding will offer insights into students' difficulties in developing a research project.

This particular study aims at exploring students' perceived challenges and complexities in finding, generating and stating their research problems. It also investigates perceived solutions for their challenges and complexities. The study thus asks the following research question to be the basis of this inquiry: How do students generate and develop their research problems? Do they find it difficult to do so? And what are their perceived solutions for these particular difficulties?

METHODS

Qualitative research is seen as an appropriate method to be used by researchers in exploring and analyzing issues regarding one's perception (Glesne, 2006; Zulfikar, 2013). In this present research, I interviewed 10 university students in their junior year. They are enrolled in the department of English Language Education, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Ar-Raniry.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews was used to explore how students generate their research ideas, and how they state and shape the research project. In addition, the interview also explores students' challenges in shaping research ideas and their perceived solutions. I also use the concept of content analysis to examine these students' proposal. I was concerned with examining students' research problems.

In addition, the data gained in this study is analyzed using coding techniques. Three stages of codification was employed in this study. First, I used open coding, in which I identified all information needed to answer my research question. In the next step, I would narrow various codes through axial coding, and later on the data were shaped through selective coding. All participants are initialized with "P", for example, participant 1 is referred to P1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings show various important data that answer the topic of inquiry. The data were codified to allow findings answer research inquiries. Three key important data were identified

from this study: sources of research problem; difficulties in stating research problems; and the perceived solutions.

Sources of Research Problem

The first main data generated from this study is regarding sources of research problems. Participants in this study have identified three sources of research problem: personal experience, literature on the previous related studies, and consultation with peers and mentors.

Personal experience

Five out of 10 students interviewed agree that reflecting on personal experience is seen as the source of research problem. These students suggest that sometimes they look at their learning difficulties, and then come up with a research problem. A student, for example says “I often reflect on my experience to explore research problem” (P1). Other students also suggest, and in their own word: “I generate my research problem through reflecting on my learning experience” (P3). In her quote, a student suggests “reflecting to my experience is a good way to find research problems, and she also said that “I often times look back into my experience and reflect to it” (P2).

These quotes suggest that experience, such as one or others’ learning experience can be one of the sources for research problems. When students engage in a particular learning experience, they look for gaps for their inquiries and shape them to be their research problem. Other student also notes that:

I get the problem from experience; actually my niece’s experience, she was in the second grade of junior high school-my niece I saw her learning English in the smart phone, and watch some application, but I don’t know what the method she uses that make her English increase. So I really want to know what method she used in learning English (P5)

P5 seems to be amazed with her niece’s achievement in English. She realized that her niece studies English on her own, and yet she is competent in the language. This curiosity is then used as a source for knowledge, in which she develops her research problems out of this curiosity.

Literature in the field

Other students in the study suggest that some they tend to consult literature in the field to identify their research problems. Some students interviewed in this study, for example, believe that reviewing previous research on the topic of inquiry will help them gain and also shape their research problems. Students in their own words utter: “I read international journals and then identify key point from them (P4). Other student states that “consulting literature and look at the pattern and example from people work” (P6).

Some students in this study agree that reviewing literature in their field of interest is seen as a way to generate research problem. This is so because previous research on similar issue enables researchers to generate and shape their research focus. Glesne (2016) and Griffee (2012) also suggest that students in their earlier stage of their proposal writing should consider consulting various literature, especially those which are related to their field of interests (see Funaro, 2014).

Consultation with peers and mentors

Some students explain that they do not read that much, and thus they would rather consult their peers and mentors on a good way to generate research problems. A student mentions “I am not a good reader, so I would consult my mentors to help shape my research problem” (P7). This suggests that there are many ways that students could refer to when shaping their research problems. Students who are not very interested in reading article to identify research problem, may consult their peers and mentors. This strategy is in line with Griffee’s (2012) suggestion to gain research idea.

Stating Research Problem

Three main issues emerged in this study in regard with students' ways of stating research problems. Having identified research problems, researchers are required to develop research problems. Three key finding coded for this particular issue:

Hard to begin

First and the foremost problem in developing research problem is how to begin writing. This issue applies to many writers; it is hard for writers and especially novice researchers to begin their writing; "it is hard to begin writing paragraph (P10)".

Some of them argue that they are confused on how to start writing, what components to discuss first and how to develop arguments in paragraph. This type of difficulty is experienced by all writers as suggested by Murray (2011).

The first problem, I don't know how to start the background of the study-development of my writing, is it about autodidact or speaking skill first, how to create the research questions- what is the first research question (P8)

The quote shows students' difficulties in developing their research problem. How to start writing and what issues to write are challenging for almost all novice researchers (Murray, 2011).

Difficult to develop line of reasoning

Students' narrative shows that writing a well-designed paragraph in stating their research problem is a great challenge. The majority of students state that they feel a challenge to write problem statement in a well-developed paragraph with a strong coherence and cohesion quality. Their paragraph seems not to be developed in such a way, which is readable to non-specialized audience. Upon examining these students' proposals, most students fail to develop a good line of reasoning upon stating their research problem. It is apparent from students' proposal submitted as the final assignment for their methodology course. For instance, in writing a proposal on "an error analysis on students' learning of present perfect tense", P10 failed to develop a good line of reasoning upon stating research problem. She seemed difficult to stay focus on her research inquiry.

This study has identified several issues regarding students' strategies in generating research problems, and their challenges in stating and developing research problem. This research also seeks to identify solutions as perceived by these students to solve their difficulties in generating and solving their research problems. Two perceived solutions are identified in this study.

Perceived Solutions

Continuous written practice

Students in this study state that keep writing in identifying, shaping and developing research problem is seen as solution. They suggest that in order to solve their problem in developing research problem effectively, some of them state that to write well they need to engage in constant writing. Agee (2009) suggests that prior to developing research problem, researchers should start thinking of what issues to research.

Look for patterning

Students suggest that in order to solve their problem in developing research problem, some students in this study believe that referring to pattern as published in different article can be a good solution. Some students state their concern: P10, for example states: "I read journal article to identify pattern on how to develop research problem". Other student notes "I see sample of people work to look for pattern, so then I can identify my own way of developing research problems" (P9).

These two comments suggest that reviewing other people's work will give ideas for someone, especially those who are still novice researchers to grasp ideas.

CONCLUSION

This article explores several issues regarding generating research problem and stating it correctly. The study found several ways in which students approach their research problems, such as

reflection on personal and other experience, consulting colleagues or mentors and also reviewing related literature. The second main findings are in regard with students' challenges in stating their research problem. Students found it a challenge to begin writing, and they are not able to develop a good line of reasoning when stating their research problems. In spite of these perceived challenges, students also offer several solutions to overcome their problems: consulting peers and mentors and also engaging in constant writing.

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