

EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING LITERATURE REVIEW OF THEIR THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Writing a thesis is difficult for undergraduate students, especially in the writing literature review section. In the English study program at Jambi University, the students faced some difficulties in writing their literature review. Hence, this study aims to investigate EFL undergraduate students' difficulties in writing the literature review of their thesis. There were two questions addressed. The first is why writing a literature review difficult for many English department students. The second is how students overcome the difficulties in writing a literature review of their thesis. The method and design used in this research were descriptive qualitative. In-depth interviews were chosen as the instrument to collect the data. There were 8 participants of academic year 2016 and 2017 who had been adjusted to the criteria. Based on the discussion, the students have difficulties writing a literature review such as selecting relevant references, restricted access to journals and textbooks, the language of the references was difficult to understand, lack of ability in writing literature review, and lack of supervisor comment. However, the students have their own ways to overcome those problems.

Keywords: Thesis, Literature Review, and Qualitative.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, writing has a crucial role in communication. Someone who has good writing skills can communicate well through writing. It is makes writing become an important thing, especially in education. Then, in the last semester at university, students are expected to conduct research in the form of a thesis that has to be submitted as the last project to get a degree. However, writing a thesis is a difficult thing to do for undergraduate students. It is because they have difficulties in every section of the thesis writing process.

Based on the experiences of most of the Jambi University English students who the researcher questioned, they had problems writing a thesis, especially in writing their literature review section. It is proven by the result of the research conducted by Wahyuni (2016) "difficulties and challenges faced by English education study program students in the completion of their theses: A phenomenology study". Because of that issue, this study will be focused on the difficulties of undergraduate students in writing a literature review.

According to Machi and McEvoy (2016), a literature review is a written document that presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current

state of knowledge about a topic of study. On the other hand, conducting a literature review is complicated for beginning educational researchers or undergraduate students because they often find challenging, sometimes confusing, and laborious processes (Chen, Wang, and Lee, 2016).

In the English study program at Jambi University, many undergraduate students still have difficulties writing literature reviews in their research. Only a few undergraduate students can fulfill this requirement satisfactorily because undergraduate students have problems developing this chapter and cannot write academically or create a good and coherent literature review. In addition, the researcher has also read several sources on this topic. In their study, (Zorn and Campbell, 2006; Akindele, 2008; Shahsavar and Kourepaz, 2020) reported that almost all students find it difficult to write literature reviews because they do not know what they have to write and do not know the limitations that they will discuss in the literature review section.

Based on the explanation of the problem above, the researcher interest conducts this study because the researcher has not yet found the same topic about the difficulties of a literature review. Then, the lack of research explaining this problem and no research discusses this topic yet, especially in the English study program at Jambi University. Therefore, the researcher will conduct this study to investigate EFL undergraduate students' difficulties in writing literature review of their thesis.

METHOD

This research used descriptive qualitative research, which aims to investigate the perspective of undergraduate students about difficulties that they faced in the process of writing a literature review and how do students overcome these difficulties. As stated by Burke and Larry (2017) qualitative researcher is a researcher who focuses on the exploration, description, and sometimes generation and construction of theories using qualitative data. Descriptive research is a research focused on providing an accurate description or picture of the status or characteristics of a situation or phenomenon (Burke and Larry, 2017). So the researcher thinks this is the compatible design to get the data.

The total student who participated in this research is 8 students from academic year 2016 and 2017. Thus, purposive sampling will be conducted by the researcher in this study. According to Creswell and Plano (2018), purposive or purposeful sampling means that researcher intentionally select individuals who have experienced the central phenomenon or the key concept being explored in the study. In this study, interview protocols are the instruments used to collect data. The type of interview is already included in the in-depth interview category, in which questions that are posed are not fixated on the interview guidelines and can deepen and developed according to their ideas and opinions that the participant provides in the interview section. The researcher used a recording device as a tool to help record when conducting interviews.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Why is writing a literature review difficult for many English department students?

1. Selecting relevant references

The data showed that writing a literature review is not an easy task for the undergraduate students; some of them still difficult in selecting relevant references. Based on interview data, Fuji academic year 2016 stated that the difficulty he felt was finding an appropriate definition of the keyword he wanted. The same thing was felt by Ani academic year 2017, who said that it was very difficult to find the articles needed. In this case, they both had difficulty finding and selecting references that supported their research. This is due to the large number of references they find, so they are confused about choosing references that are really appropriate and suitable to be written in their review literature. In line with research by Chen, Wang and Lee (2015), stated challenges in scoping or writing a literature review include difficulties such as being difficult to filter high-quality and relevant papers for review.

On the other hand, limited resources related to research topics also become a challenge for many students when writing literature reviews. Here, Parhan academic year 2016, said that the research he was doing was still relatively new in the field, and only a few people researched the topic. It is showed in some excerpts below:

From some of the evidence above, it can be concluded that a large number of available online sources and excessive search results make students difficult to manage a large amount of references. Then, the limitation of references related to the research topic also resulted in novice researchers because the lack of previous research that discusses their research topic.

2. Restricted access to journals and textbooks

When students have found sources that are relevant to their research, they experience difficulties due to restricted access to related journals and textbooks both online and offline. Maudy academic year 2017, said that it was challenging to find online references because it was due to several factors, such as an unsupportive internet network because she lived in a village, and also not all articles and online journals were trusted or had a DOI. This idea added by Ani academic year 2017 too. Ani said that it is difficult to find relevant references because some related sources cannot be accessed or downloaded for free. A similar problem was also identified by Wahyuni (2016). In her study, the most difficult thing that students experience when reviewing literature related to research topics is that the availability of sources containing the topic of their search is limited, and the original books they need are very expensive.

Thus, most students also experienced difficulties when looking for offline references or theses to the library. Here, Dani academic year 2016, stated that in the current situation of the Covid pandemic, it is very difficult to find references to the library due to limited visiting times, and the library is not open every day. Then, Fuji and Meci also experienced difficulties when looking for offline references in the library, such as the difficulty of getting the relevant references due to the limited availability of books and not all sources or books can be borrowed from the library because they are only read on the spot.

3. The language of the references was difficult to understand

The results of the interview stated that many English students had language difficulties when understanding the language of the references they found. According to Suzy academic year 2017 said that sometimes the journals that are read use vocabulary or language that is high enough and difficult to understand, so it must be read repeatedly to find out the meaning of the article or journal. In addition, Maudy also has the same experience as Suzy. She also felt that the language used in some journals was rather difficult and complicated, making it difficult for him to understand the meaning of sentences or theories written by these researchers. The language used in the references is very academic and complicated, so that the readers are confused in understanding the meaning of texts.

4. Lack of ability in writing literature review

Based on the results of the interview, several things cause students to have difficulty writing literature reviews. Here is one of the students' experiences when writing a literature review. Nur academic year 2017, perceived that paraphrase is a problem that causes her difficulties writing a literature review because the researcher cannot directly take expert opinions continuously. On the other hand, Meci academic year 2016 also faced difficulties writing literature reviews. She found it difficult to paraphrase the experts' opinions, so she prefers to directly copy and paste the experts' opinions into chapter two. The result is consistent with other studies in that due to novice researchers also face challenges in extracting the main findings from each paper, synthesizing the extracted findings, and providing recommendations for future research in the discussion (Chen, Wang and Lee, 2015).

5. Lack of supervisor comment.

Based on the interview result, 6 out of 8 students have problems on the process of the guidance of their supervisor in writing literature reviews, such as the supervisors did not give enough feedback for students, supervisors were busy and slow to respond.

As stated by Ani academic year 2017, she admitted that she rarely carried out the guidance process with the supervisor to discuss the thesis or discuss about chapter two. It is because her supervisor was busy. Nur academic year 2017 also have similar problems with Ani. She said that the short guidance process did not discuss how to overcome difficulties when writing literature reviews, and the supervisor also took a long time to respond and provide feedback from the thesis.

Fuji academic year 2016 also said that my supervisor just said wrong without saying what was right. That opinion was also added by Suzy academic year 2017, who stated that supervisors did not provide comments from a linguistic perspective on writing a literature review. This makes students confused about how to fix the difficulties they faced, and also, they do not know what kind of writing the relevant literature review is. A similar problem was also identified by Shahsavari and Kourepaz (2020). In their study, several graduate students mentioned that their research methods professors did not teach them how to write creative, integrated literature reviews, and most supervisors did not have strong contributions in writing their literature reviews.

How do students overcome the difficulties in writing a literature review of their thesis?

1. Select relevant references for the topic under study

The students select the appropriate references to be included in their research by selecting references based on specific criteria. For example, choose references that have the same methodology as their research. Dani and Suzy academic year 2016, 2017 mentioned that they tend to choose the same references they will use. This is in line with the opinion of Fink (2014) applying practical screening criteria in selecting references. This trick can make it easier for students to choose the relevant references to their research without having to be confused because there are too many sources related to the research topic.

2. Use open sources and learn tricks to get access journals and e-books for free

In this case, some students have different ways of overcoming their difficulties when accessing or downloading the references they need. According to Meci academic year 2016, she mentioned that she ever used a website that made it easier for her to download articles and books for free. That was obtained by asking her supervisor and friends about sites that could be used to download journals without paying. For example, the books you need can be downloaded on Gen. lib.rus.ec and limited journals can be obtained using the Sci-hub website.

3. Improving English skills to read a difficult text

Based on the interview results, Dani students of the academic year 2016 stated that to understand the opinions of experts that are difficult to understand, he translated these opinions into Indonesian first. Another student also told the same experience. Suzy academic year 2017 felt that her vocabulary increase when reading articles in academic language.

Nur academic year 2017 also said that using scanning techniques to get and understand the important points of an article has been read. After getting the main idea from the text, she will paraphrase the expert opinion to be included in the literature review. The effective method for improving students' skills in understanding a text is by using scanning and skimming methods (Hastowoadi, 2016). It is proven as the excerpts below:

4. Practice frequently how to summarize, paraphrase and synthesize information

Based on the interview result, Meci academic year 2016 mentioned that when writing a literature review, she experienced difficulties paraphrasing and overcoming these difficulties by using a website that can automatically paraphrase. Then, Suzy academic year 2017 said that to overcome difficulties in paraphrasing. First, she translated the sentence she wanted to paraphrase into Indonesian using Google translate. Then, after knowing the meaning of the expert's opinion, she paraphrased the sentence using her own words. Next, sentences that have been paraphrased are checked using a Grammarly checker. In the last step, the results of the paraphrase are copied and pasted into the automatic paraphrase tool to see the percentage, whether there is a similarity or not.

They use an automatic paraphrase tool to make it easier for students to paraphrase the experts' opinions. Maudy academic year 2017, said that she had heard of an application that could make it easier for students to paraphrase automatically and only use the internet network.

5. Improving students' initiative in revising their literature review.

Students' success in completing their thesis is strongly influenced by the smooth process of guidance with supervisors. Building a good working relationship between supervisor and student is an important requirement of a successful dissertation (Harrison & Whalley, 2008). However, in reality, not all thesis guidance processes run smoothly, especially in writing literature a review process.

Based on the lack of supervisor guidance in writing literature reviews, every student has their own way to solve the problems, like improve their initiative to revising and contacting their supervisor frequently. As Suzy was mentioned in the interview, she said that although her supervisor did not give sufficient advice in writing a literature review, she had the initiative to improve the writing of the literature review by paraphrasing what she would write in chapter two. This happened because she had learned how to paraphrase sentences in the previous semester.

Meanwhile, to overcome the problem of slow-response supervisors, Parhan and Fuji also have the initiative to overcome this problem. They will contact their supervisor repeatedly until they get feedback from the supervisor. Parhan also said that he would contact the supervisor every three days via chat. If after three days there is still no response, then he will contact the supervisor again. Fuji added that if there is still no supervisor's response, I will find out where my supervisor is and meet him.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion to answer the first question, there are some kinds of difficulties that the students found while writing a literature review. Writing a literature review can be said to be difficult for beginner researchers because they do not have enough knowledge and experience to write a literature review perfectly.

The difficulties that become a challenge for students in writing literature reviews such as difficulty in choosing references that are appropriate to the research topic, difficulty in accessing the required references, difficulty understanding the contents of references that have been read and lack of attention from supervisors when writing literature reviews. All of these things become challenges for students in completing chapter two.

The second research question is about the way students overcome writing the literature review. There are five ways students used to overcome the difficulties during writing their literature review such as select relevant references for the topic under study, use open sources and learn tricks to get access journals and e-books for free, Improving English skills to read a difficult text, practice frequently how to summarize, paraphrase and synthesize information, and improving students' initiative in revising their literature review.

Based on the results of the discussion, even though students had difficulty writing literature reviews, they were also looking for ways to overcome those problems. However,

not all students were able to solve the difficulties that they experienced when writing a literature review in their thesis.

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