

Using Self-Formative Evaluation to Improve Academic Writing Skills

Fazillah Sulaiman

Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia, Kem Sungai Besi Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
fazillah@upnm.edu.my

Nur Syafiqah Mohd Yazib

Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia, Kem Sungai Besi Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
nursyafiqah@upnm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of using self-formative evaluation to improve academic writing skills. The objective of the study is to monitor the progress of the students and to help the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in writing. Poor academic writing skills will demotivate the students to write. This study utilised a quantitative analysis involving twenty-five Language Centre students from the English for Academic Writing (LLE 3012) class at the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM). The teaching and learning process took place till the seventh week and the students were taught all the necessary lessons on academic writing skills. In week seven, the students were given a task to write an academic essay in class. After submitting their academic essay, the students need to evaluate themselves using the questionnaire on their performance. Later, the teaching and learning process continued, focusing on the area in which they were weak. At the end of the fourteenth week, the students were given another writing task and the same questionnaire. Directive feedback was also given where necessary in week seven. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics generated from the SPSS. It was found that the mean for the first self-formative evaluation was lower compared to the mean of the second self-formative evaluation. In week seven, the students were weak in referencing. The lecturer focused more on the referencing topic, and by week fourteen, the mean for the referencing evaluation was higher than in week seven. This indicates that using the self-formative evaluation aids the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Academic writing skills; feedback; referencing; self-formative evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing, which is made explicitly for educational purposes, is a challenging task from primary to tertiary level. Writing is considered a kind of spoken language only that it has been represented graphically and symbolically (Ramadani, 2013). Writing skills is quite complicated as it requires students to produce ideas, words, sentences, paragraphs and compositions. Without specific words or grammar, students can become frustrated while writing an academic piece as they cannot express the intended meaning of their writing (Harmer 2001). There are many components of writing such as planning, revising, grammar, organisation, style, tone, and the list will go on in order to get an excellent piece of writing. Academic writing is different from other kinds of writing as it uses standard and formal language (Wirantaka, 2019). Azizi (2018), in The Star Malaysia newspaper, mentioned the importance of academic writing as it is the dominant role in academics. He added that poor academic writing skills would lead to difficulties explaining the complex subject, especially in higher institutions. Azizi further explained writing with precise phrases and styles would assist

the reader in understanding the information that is being conveyed. Consistent feedback can help students to improve their skills in academic writing. According to Andrade and Valcheva (2009), students can assess themselves as it is a form of formative assessment where students evaluate their own work based on a rubric. Hence, this will help the students to increase their achievement. Ainsworth (2010) mentioned that it had been proven that in formative assessment when feedback are provided from both teachers and students, students will make progress in their study. The objective of the study is to monitor the progress of the students and to help them to identify their strengths and weaknesses in writing. The researchers formulated three research questions that are;

1. What are the abilities of the students in academic writing?
2. What are the problems face by the students in academic writing?
3. What was the impact of using self-formative evaluation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As an educator, we can find many problems in academic writing. A study was done by Abdulkareem (2013) to find out the academic writing problems faced by the Arab speaking postgraduate students at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The results showed that the students are weak in sentence structure, vocabulary, and expressing ideas. Khadijah (2020) mentioned that students commit mistakes or encounter many problems in academic writing because they have little knowledge of that subject. By using an academic writing test and questionnaire, Khadijah (2020) investigated the fifth-semester students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar problems in academic writing, where she found out that the major issues are lack of planning, lexical difficulties and grammatical error. Al Fadda (2012) has conducted a research on the students of King Saudi University (KSU) to find out students' challenges in writing. The result showed that the students face many difficulties in writing such as grammar, combining sentences, avoiding some words and phrases and making sentence fragment in their writing. According to Bolsunovskaya & Rymanova (2020), to prevent problems in writing, lecturers should motivate the students to write. At the same time, it is essential to explore different teaching methods to inspire the students to write.

Brown (2001) stated that to improve students writing quality, giving feedback is a necessary process. Ur (1996) added that feedback is provided by the instructors with the intention to improve the students writing skills also for the instructors to note the students strengths and weaknesses. Plaindaren and Parilah (2019) studied the effectiveness of written feedback in writing tasks among upper secondary school pupils and showed that feedback can positively enhance the student's performance in writing. In addition, the teaching and learning of writing skill was easier to be conducted as the feedback plays an important role in helping students to move forward in their writing tasks. Larsen-Freeman (2003) added that feedback given must be effective and non-judgemental to promote positive improvement. Negative feedback can demotivate the students, and the main objective of the teaching and learning process would not be met. According to Wahyuni (2017), there are two types of feedback namely direct corrective feedback and indirect corrective feedback. Direct corrective feedback requires the correct form of the errors or mistakes made by the students, while indirect corrective feedback will not provide the correct form of the errors.

Hayes (2021) wrote that self-assessment is an important part of formative assessment and will help the students to evaluate their learning process. He added that using self-formative assessment technique can help the students to identify their weaknesses and independent learning can be reinforced in the learning process. Borg and Edmett (2019), in their research, mentioned that self-evaluation questionnaires can be filled in to monitor the progress of their

performance for any lesson. It has been proven by many researchers that self-evaluation enhances academic results (McDonald & Boud, 2003; Irving et al., 2003). A study by Zahra and Ali (2014) on the impact of self-assessment on writing skills revealed that students writing skills improved gradually by evaluating their own writing. The study also showed the students were comfortable about the self-assessment and answered the questionnaire honestly. The researchers concluded that self-assessment was able to aid the learning process.

The theoretical model for self-evaluation

Figure 1. Theoretical for self-evaluation
Source: Adopted from Rolheiser (1996)

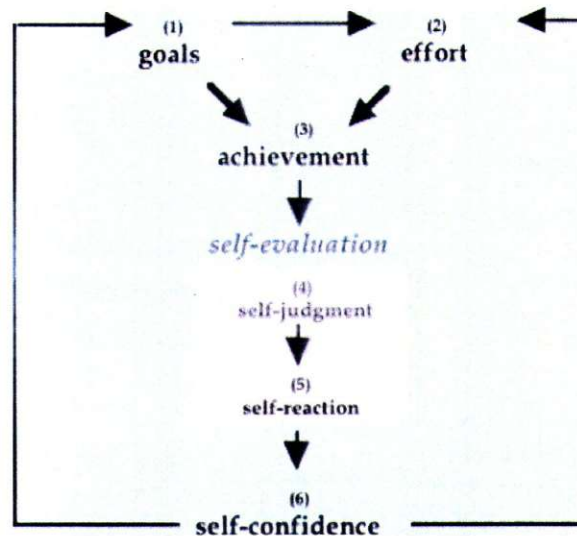


Figure 1 shows the theoretical model of how self-evaluation contributes to learning (Rolheiser,1996). According to Rolheiser (1996), self-evaluation is essential in developing students' interest in learning. The theoretical model describes self-evaluation will help the students to set higher goals, and students will make more effort in order to gain achievement. Thus, the achievement of the students results in self-judgment, self-reaction and self-confidence. Self-judgement is where the students could contemplate questions on whether their goals were met or not; self-reaction is responding to the judgement such as their feelings regarding the achievement of their goals. All these, goals, effort, achievement, self-judgment, and self-reaction will positively give an impact on students' self-confidence. In short, self-evaluation is a combination of self-judgement and self-reaction leading to a positive self-confidence that could contribute to a better learning.

METHOD

The respondents are 25 first year Language Centre students from the English for Academic Writing (LLE 3012) class at the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM). The teaching and learning process is carried out from the first to the seventh week. The topics are summarising, paraphrasing, synthesising and referencing. After week seven, the students are given a task in class to write an academic essay entitled *The Impact of COVID on People's Life*. After submitting their academic essay, the students need to evaluate themselves using the questionnaire on their performance. At the same time, the lecturer will provide the necessary

feedback for the student to work on. Later, the teaching and learning process continued, focusing on the area in which they were weak. At the end of the fourteenth week, the students are given another writing task entitled *The Challenges of Online Learning* and the same questionnaire. This study used a modified version of *ESLP 82 Questionnaire: Self-Assessment of English Writing Skills and use of Writing Strategies* (Marquette University, 2008). The data were analysed using descriptive statistics generated from the SPSS. Table 1 describes, in brief, the process of this study

Table 1. The Process of the Study

Weeks 1 -7	Teaching and Learning Process	Summarising Paraphrasing Synthesising Referencing
Week 7	Writing Essay The Impact of COVID on People’s Life Self-formative Evaluation (Questionnaire) Feedback from lecturer	
Weeks 8-14	Teaching and Learning Process Continues	Summarising Paraphrasing Synthesising Referencing
Week 14	Writing Essay The Challenges of Online Learning Self-formative Evaluation (Questionnaire)	

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 2 shows the mean score of the self-formative questionnaire for Week 7 and 14. In Week 7, for the organisation, the students were weak in writing a clear topic sentence that identifies the topic and controlling idea of a paragraph. As for style and tone, the lowest mean in Week 7 is writing using an academic style and tone. As for referencing, the lowest mean is for “I can successfully use internet search engines to locate information to support my ideas”. In the brainstorming section, the lowest mean is for “ I can effectively brainstorm to gather ideas before writing”. For revision and editing, the mean for revising their own writing to improve the development and organisation is slightly lower. In week 14, the students improve in many of the writing elements.

Table 2. The Mean Score of the Self-Formative Questionnaire for Week 7 and 14

	Week 7	Week 14
Organisation		
I can write a clear topic sentence that identifies the topic and controlling idea of a paragraph.	2.7	3.2
I can logically organise my ideas when I write a paragraph.	2.4	3.3
I can logically support and develop my main point when I write a paragraph.	2.4	4.1
I can write a clear thesis statement that identifies the topic and controlling idea of an essay.	2.4	4.0

Style and tone		
I can write using an academic style and tone.	2.3	3.0
I can use appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader.	2.4	4.2
I can use a variety of sentence structures.	3.0	4.0
I can write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English.	3.0	3.0
I can write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English.	4.0	4.1
I can write accurate quotations in English.	3.0	4.3
Referencing		
I can use accurate in-text citations using APA	2.6	4.0
I can write an accurate Works Cited sheet for sources using APA.	2.4	4.5
I can successfully conduct library research to locate information to support my ideas.	2.4	4.2
I can successfully use internet search engines to locate information to support my ideas.	2.3	4.5
Brainstorming		
I can effectively brainstorm to gather ideas before writing.	2.9	4.0
I can take good notes on readings and then use them to help support my ideas in writing.	3.2	3.5
I can write an outline to logically organise my ideas before writing.	3.0	4.0
Revision and Editing		
I can revise my own writing to improve the development and organisation.	3.5	4.0
I can edit my writing to improve the wording, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	3.6	4.1

Table 3 shows the mean score of the writing elements in the self-formative questionnaire for weeks 7 and 14. In week 7, the students were weak in referencing. However, in Week 14 they have improved their skills in referencing. Not only that, they managed to improve all the writing elements in week 14.

Table 3. The Mean Score of the Writing Elements in Self-Formative Questionnaire for Week 7 and 14

	Week 7	Week 14
Organisation	2.6	3.5
Style and tone	2.9	3.6
Referencing	2.4	4.3
Brainstorming	3.2	3.8
Revision and Editing	3.5	4.1

Table 4 shows some random directive writing feedback from the lecturer. The feedback were given in Week 7. These directive feedbacks are related to organisation, style and tone, referencing, brainstorming, revision and editing. The lecturer selected these directive feedbacks as these are among the most common mistakes made by the students.

Table 4. Directive Writing Feedback in Week 7

Organisation	The flow of the essay- unity and coherence Thesis statement need to be clearer
Style and tone	Formal writing tone-avoid informal words choices Wrong usage of vocabulary
Referencing	APA style for citation
Brainstorming	Can add more ideas such as... Poor reasoning Very short sentences
Revision and Editing	Spelling mistake Add transition words Combine paragraphs

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This research has three research questions. The first research question is about the abilities of the students in academic writing. It was found that the students can write accurately paraphrase of the information that they have read in English. This shows that the students have good understanding in English. Furthermore, the students were Language Centre students, and some were majoring in English Language. Thus, they had the advantage of grasping the knowledge of academic writing skills instantly, which could also lead to their progressive performance at the end of the semester. As mentioned by Abdulkareem (2013), mistakes will only occur if a student have little knowledge regarding the academic writing skills.

For the second research question on the problems faced by the students, it shows that the students were relatively weak in referencing and organisation in the first seven week. Referencing comprises of using APA style for in-text citation and conducting library as well as internet research to support ideas. Organisation includes writing a clear topic sentence, organising ideas, supporting and developing main points and writing a clear thesis statement. In week fourteen, there was a significant improvement not only with these two skills but also in other related skills such as style and tone, referencing, brainstorming, revision and editing. When the teaching process took place, the lessons taught were summarising, paraphrasing, synthesising and referencing. Among the lessons taught in these topics are the characteristics of a good summary, steps to summarise long text, paraphrasing methods, note-taking for synthesising, writing the synthesis essay, in-text citation, developing a search strategy and APA style formatting. In class, a lecture is given and followed by writing practices where the students will be in a group to brainstorm on the writing practices. In week seven, after sitting for their first writing and evaluating themselves using a self-formative questionnaire, directive writing feedback were given by the lecturer so that the students have a more precise idea of the mistake they had made and were able to work on that. Hayes (2021) explained that self-assessment necessary as by evaluating the students' learning process students are able to figure out their strength and weaknesses. Thus, independent learning can be carried out by the students to mark the students' improvement in the related topics. In addition, when feedback is given positively ad without any judgemental, students improvement can be seen tremendously (Plaindaren & Parilah, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

In this study, the self-formative evaluation method is used to positively enhance the student's writing skills, which answered the third research question on the impact of using self-formative evaluation. This study has proven that self-assessment can improve students writing

skills (McDonald & Boud, 2003; Irving et al., 2003; Zahra & Ali, 2014). As a matter of fact, feedback managed to help the students to do their revision as they had an idea of their strengths and weaknesses and were able to practice more individually, which enabled them to boost their writing skills (Ur, 1996; Plaindaren and Parilah, 2019). Not only that, improving their academic writing skills will also help the students to boost their confidence (Rolheiser, 1996). Thus, getting confidence in writing will allow them to stay focused and, at the same time, could motivate them to write without being afraid of making mistakes.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, lecturers should include self-formative assessment in the teaching and learning process because this will help the students to think, evaluate and revise their writing. There are many other related skills besides organisation, style and tone, referencing, brainstorming, revision and editing. Perhaps other related skills, such as grammar, ideas and content, can be included in future research. Incorporating feedback as an essential element in writing will significantly impact future research as feedback can be considered the best approach to improve students' academic writing skills.

REFERENCES

- Abdulkareem, M. N. (2013). An investigation study of academic writing problems faced by Arab postgraduate students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3 (9), 1552-1557.
- Ainsworth, L. (2010). *Rigorous curriculum design*. Englewood: Leadership and Learning Center.
- Al Fadda, H. (2012). Difficulties in academic writing: From the perspective of King Saud University postgraduate students. *English Language Teaching*. 5(3), 123-130.
- Andrade, H., & Valtcheva, A. (2009). Promoting learning and achievement through self-assessment. *Theory into Practice*, 48, 12-19.
- Azizi Ahmad (2018, September 17). Importance of academic writing. *The Star*. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2018/09/17/importance-of-academic-writing>
- Bolsunovskaya, L. & Rymanova, I. (2020). Academic writing: Difficulties and possible solutions for engineering students. *Higher Education in Russia*, 29 (10), 77-85. doi:10.31992/0869-3617-2020-29-10-77-85
- Borg, S., and Edmett, A. (2019). Developing a self-assessment tool for English language teachers. *Language Teaching Research*, 23, 655-679. doi:10.1177/1362168817752543
- Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy (2nd Edition)*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Hayes, J. (2021). What are the benefits of formative self-assessment in modern education? Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-benefits-formative-self-assessment-modern-education-james-hayes/>
- Irving, S., Moore, D., Hamilton, R. (2003). Mentoring for high ability high school students. *Education and Training*, 45(2), 100-109.
- Khadijah (2020). An analysis of students' problems in academic writing at English department students in 2019 academic year of UNISMUH. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Makassar, Indonesia.

- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Teaching language: From grammar to grammaring*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Marquette Univeristy. (2008). ESLP82 Questionnaire. Retrieved from: <http://marquette.edu/oie/documents/ESLP82QuestionnaireFa08.pdf>
- McDonald, B. & Boud, D. (2003). The impact of self- assessment on achievement: the effects of self- assessment training on performance in external examinations. *Assessment in Education*, 10(2), 209–220.
- Plaindaren, C., & Parilah Mohd Shah (2019). A study on the effectiveness of written feedback in writing tasks among upper secondary school pupils. *Creative Education*, 10, 3491-3508. doi: 10.4236/ce.2019.1013269
- Ramadani, S.A. (2013). Improving students' writing ability in writing descriptive texts through field trip at SMAN 1 GODEAN. Unpublished master's thesis. Yogyakarta.
- Rolheiser, C (Ed.). (1996). *Self-evaluation...Helping students get better at it!* Ajax, ON: Visutronx.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A Course in tanguage teaching, practice and theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zahra Fahimi & Ali Rahimi (2015). On the impact of self-assessment practice on writing skills. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192, 730-736.