The Implementation of the Academic Writing Course Syllabus

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Abstract

Curriculum change required to meet the stakeholders' needs, whether it occurs in regular bases or in responding towards some dissatisfaction of students' learning outcomes. This study was triggered by the second reason. To be more specific, it focused on how the syllabus was implemented in terms of teaching materials, classroom exercises, home assignments, and final projects. Document analyses were conducted and were validated using instrument triangulation. A semi structured interview was given to 18 first semester graduate students of 2013-2014 academic year. The findings were intended as a contribution and feedback towards the teaching-learning process of Academic Writing course at the English Education Department, Graduate School, Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya. From the analyses, it showed that the course syllabus was implemented in accordance with the learning objectives. However, there were some items evaluated in the students' result which had not met the objectives as written in the syllabus. The gap was ultimately noted as the consequence that students were not accustomed to use the academic writing manual, and they were short of academic writing practice. Hence, some suggestions were proposed to give them more sustainable tasks to use the format, read and analyze more journal articles, as the model of writing. The result of this study was supposed to give contribution not only to the improvement of the institution's curriculum, but also to wider pedagogical content knowledge, mainly on English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching.

Keywords: implementation, syllabus, Academic Writing

Introduction

To fulfill the changing needs of both students and society, reviews and revisions of curricula are held on a regular basis. This process could be either as a part of a normal cycle organized by educational authorities or as a responsive action toward "triggering events" such as poor students' performances. The results provide substantial information about the institution to make change and improvements on its curriculum and also to be useful for broader academic community.

Typically, the related studies on reviewing and revising curricula are done by comparing the intended curriculum and what actually takes place in the classrooms and schools. Therefore, the procedure involved the official documents such as curriculum frameworks, syllabi (subject-specific curricula), and other written documents used in teaching and learning activities. (Tibbitts, 2015). Each evaluation of the course syllabus' implementation could contribute to the whole review of an institution's curriculum. Thus, the present study captured an image of the course syllabus implementation aiming at the integral course and institution development.

The research of course syllabus implementation basically investigated on how the written syllabus was carried out in the real teaching and learning activities. In the syl-

labus, learning objectives act as a main goal to achieve. Teaching materials and activities are designed and used to help students meet the expected learning objectives. And the final assessment is an ultimate reflection of students' achievement to the learning objectives. All of the stated information in the syllabus is generally acknowledged as a contract or a permanent record between teacher and students during the course (Parkes & Harris, 2002). In other words, a study of syllabus implementation generally aims at crosschecking whether what was promised in the syllabus was well executed during the course.

The role of students is essential in evaluating the syllabus implementation. The students can be a living proof of how well a course syllabus is being implemented. To indicate the success of a course syllabus implementation, the students should be able to understand and benefit the teaching materials in ease. The tasks and activities should be designed to help students practicing what had been taught. And the assessment should be done to prove whether the learning objectives have been achieved by the targeted students or not.

Moreover, students can be a source of how the course syllabus will be improved. El-Sakran (2014) suggested that students' feedback was the evidence of students' actual need to build course contents. His investigations towards the details of participants' backgrounds and aspirations, course objectives, course contents, the students' perceptions of the whole course, the textbook used, the assigned tasks and activities, and the staging and administration of the course earned some pedagogical implications for respective ESP teachers and course designers.

He found out that all the participants in an ESP Course in the United Arab Emirates,

he studied, perceived the overall course contents as interesting, relevant, and eye opening. The course textbook was quite appropriate to the course since it met the course objectives and enriched students' knowledge of ESP. The language used in the book was clear and easy to understand. The book provided clear and reader-friendly explanations. And the assignment sequence was designed based on a scaffolding approach. However, based on students' perceptions, they demanded more examples of the studies. Despite of those findings, this study had not delved into students' final projects.

The present study investigated the implementation of the Academic Writing course syllabus in Widya Mandala graduate school. The course was taught by a team of two, and it was investigating the 2nd part of the semester. It was held in the first semester started from October 2, 2013 to November 20, 2013, with three hours per meeting from 6 pm until 9 pm. The participants of this study were 18 students of the Academic Writing course batch 19, excluding the researcher. Most of them were not full-time students. They teach in the morning. The syllabus aimed at preparing the students writing their research thesis proposal. As a result, the main parts taken into consideration were format, introduction, and literature review.

It was stated in the learning objectives that: firstly, in the format of a paper students were able to (a) write a running head, (b) make a suitable short title, (c) formulate a good title, and (d) write in a proper level of heading. The second point was about the content of the introduction, where students were supposed to able to (a) state a clear research problem, (b) show the importance of the study, (c) state a clear purpose of the study, (d) cite the sources of the previous

research to support the arguments, (e) write transitional devices between paragraphs, and (f) write a brief summary of the research design. Thirdly, in literature review of essays, students were able to (a) identify the research variables used and the relationship between them, (b) cite sources to support the arguments, not a list of definition, (c) discuss and comment summaries of previous research/theoretical background, (d) write transitional devices between paragraphs.

In fact, the results of students' final projects showed that the students scored very low especially in formatting the level of heading, writing the introduction and literature review section. Consequently, seven students batch 19 joining that Academic Writing course got minimum score B⁻ and they were given an opportunity to learn more and revise their paper. Only one student got A and another one got A⁻. Other six students got B⁺. The other four students got B. The result of that preliminary research showed that the students still did not accomplish the final project as what had been taught in the teaching materials. Therefore, a deep analysis on the syllabus implementation was conducted accordingly.

Hence, the present study was an evaluative study aiming at investigating the implementation of the Academic Writing course syllabus in terms of teaching materials, classroom exercises, home assignments, and also final project. The document reviews were conducted to analyze the content of the collected data. To describe a deep analysis on that implementation of academic writing course syllabus, the graduate students' perspectives were elicited through semi-structure interviews.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this research were eighteen students of the English Education Department Batch 19, Graduate School, Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya. They took Academic Writing course in the first semester. And all of them hardly got experience in academic writing before taking that course.

Data Analysis

The data of this study were (1) the content of the teaching materials, (2) the instruction and students' results from classroom exercises, home assignments, and final projects, and then (3) the students' responses toward interviews.

At first, the researcher analyzed the teaching materials, classroom exercises, home assignments, and final projects in accordance with the learning objectives. Document analyses of teaching materials focused on evaluating the content and the teaching aids. And, document analyses of students' classroom exercises, students' home assignments, and students' final projects emphasized on evaluating the instruction and the students' results.

To triangulate the results of the document analyses, the researcher elicited students' perception on the implementation of academic writing course syllabus by conducting interviews. The interview questions encompassed (1) what teaching materials were remembered (by students), (2) how their feelings were, (3) how they solved problems dealing with teaching materials, classroom exercises, home assignments, and final projects. The interview results were transcribed and analyzed carefully to find common difficulties and strategies to solve them.

Based on the result of document analyses and interview, the consistent patterns and the possible gap in the implementation of the Academic Writing course syllabus were highlighted. Those findings were cross-checked by pedagogical theories and previous studies. Moreover, those findings were discussed and linked to the existing problems (see, the background of the study).

Findings

The Teaching Materials

The document analyses showed that the chosen content of the teaching materials covered almost all the learning objectives in format, introduction, and literature review section, except the explanation on how-to-identify the research variables used and the relationship between them (learning objective point 3.a). There were several supplementary materials to be read at home, such as materials on page numbering, writing abstract, building academic words, and developing rationale. All of those additional materials were given to support the students' independent learning process after the class.

The teaching materials were clearly presented with some real examples to deepen students' understanding on the concepts. The examples--especially on introduction and literature review--were directly quoted and cited from reliable journal articles. Students then could use the examples as a model in their writing. However, there were some learning objectives still needed vivid examples, such as how-to-formulate the short title (learning objective point 1.b), how-to-state the research problems (learning objective point 2.a), how-to-show the importance of the study (learning objective point 2.b), and how-to-write a brief summary of the research design (learning objective point 2.f).

Further, the document analyses showed that the teaching aids supported the content of the teaching materials. The course book *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th edition* was a source of teaching materials on introduction section. The book *Becoming an Academic Writer* was quoted as supplementary materials such as building academic words, developing rationale, and writing summary of research design. The downloaded journals were used as examples in introduction section and literature review section. Beside the Publication Manual, the reference menu of MS Word was also presented and in-class practiced to help students do the referencing section. The result of students' interview showed that all students gave positive responses in getting downloaded journals and practicing through MS Word, except participants were reluctant to the course books, i.e., the APA Publication Manual 6th edition. They preferred having the real model of the content from the journals and practicing the format directly through MS Word.

The document analyses and interview result also showed that there were classroom exercises on writing running head, short title, title, and level of headings after the explanation of the teaching materials. There were more exercises on how-to-write level of headings based on APA 6th Edition format. The result of the classroom exercises showed that students could accomplish as what had been explained in the teaching materials. However, there were some mistakes noted. For example, students often neglected the details of mechanics and grammar, such as font style, font size, punctuations, and word formation. It turned out to the fact that all participants actually did not realize

their mistakes as stated in the interview that they got no problems in doing the exercises.

On the other hand, the home assignments emphasized more on writing the content of manuscript, such as introduction and literature review. There were more assignments on how-to-write introduction. Based on the result of the home assignments, students could not accomplish as what had been taught in the teaching materials. For example, several students were not able to (1) state the research problem clearly (2) show the importance of the study in terms of authenticity, new insight, and relevance, and (3) write a brief summary of the research design in introduction part. Furthermore, students could not (1) identify variables used and the relationships between them (2) cite sources to support their arguments, and (3) discuss and comment summaries of previous research/ theoretical background in literature review section. However, students could write a clear purpose of the study as what had been explained in the teaching materials.

And that result was confirmed by the result of interview. When doing home assignments, all participants found difficulties in meeting the learning objectives, except in writing the purpose of the study. The participants stated it was easy to write the purpose of the study since the materials clearly explained with the examples. And the participants could simply write the purpose of the study as the answer of their research questions. However, to meet other learning objectives, the participants realized that they needed more writing experience to state a clear research problem in introduction and needed critical thinking to discuss and comment summaries of previous research/ theoretical background in literature review.

Moreover, the participants also felt hard to write a brief summary of the research design in introduction; and to identify research variables used and show the relationships between them in literature review since those were not explained explicitly in the teaching materials. And there were no vivid examples supporting the explanations of the teaching materials on how-to-write the importance of the study. Consequently, the participants faced difficulties in accomplishing the home assignments. They tried to solve it by reading the book and research journals a lot, but they still could not tackle the problems.

In fact, the students' final projects also showed that there were no improvements on some item evaluated such as (1) stating the research problem clearly (2) showing the importance of the study in terms of authenticity, new insight, and relevance, and (3) writing a brief summary of the research design in introduction part. Furthermore, students still could not (1) identify variables used and the relationships between them and (2) discuss and comment summaries of previous research/ theoretical background in literature review section.

The well accomplished part of the final project was in the format section. Even though, students still struggled in writing the level of headings. They did not show the consistency in writing the subheadings based on standardized format. And the worst was there was no subheadings at all, especially for the literature review. They just wrote down several blocks of paragraphs without categorizing it under certain subheadings. However, they did not realize it as shown by the result of interview.

Discussions

Based on the findings in the document analyses and interviews, the Academic Writing course syllabus was implemented in accordance with the learning objectives.It could be seen from the teaching materials, classroom exercises, home assignments, and final projects given to the students. The content of the teaching materials supported by the appropriate teaching aids covered the learning objectives. The classroom exercises and the home assignments were given right after the explanation of the teaching materials. The classroom exercises emphasized on practicing standardized format, while the home assignments emphasized on writing the content of manuscript.

According to the students' result, students were more able to do the technical task such as setting format than to do the writing task such as writing the content of the manuscript. The highest accomplishments were in writing the format of running head, short title, and title. On the other hand, the poorest score of students was in writing the literature review section.

Despite the satisfying fulfillment in the format section, it was noted that some students still has troubles in writing the format of the levels of headings. The document analyses showed that students often neglected the detail of mechanics such as font style, font size, and punctuation. And based on interview result, all participants did not realized their mistakes. They stated that they got no problems on those exercises since they got sufficient concepts and practices about writing format.

They did not write the format correctly, not because they did not know how to write it, but they did not know how essential to write it. Their unconsciousness to use the systematic format could be strongly caused by their previous or inadequate writing experience. Possibly, students might not have the sense of 'getting accustomed to' in using a rigid writing format. Consequently, they were not aware of its importance to write properly such as using standardized font style, font size, and correct punctuations.

Further, the results of students' final projects also showed that there were some items evaluated without improvements from classroom exercises, home assignments, until final projects such as (1) stating the research problem clearly (2) showing the importance of the study in terms of authenticity, new insight, and relevance, and (3) writing a brief summary of the research design in introduction part. Based on the interview result, most participants stated that they felt difficult to organize the ideas. Consequently, they read more other research journals related to the topic. These attempts showed positive impacts, afterwards.

From that fact, it could be concluded that students actually needed reading exposure more. Krashen (1989) stated that reading exposure could improve grammatical development and writing style. Moreover, it could also ignite students' critical thinking especially in their writing. Then the sense of writing would be built by the time. That sense enables students to show their ideas in the appropriate words and organize their ideas in coherent paragraphing.

In addition, the document analyses showed that students still could not (1) identify variables used and the relationships between them and (2) discuss and comment summaries of previous research/ theoretical background in literature review section. Based on the interview result, participants got less examples and its explanation in the literature review section. And they stated

that some given journal examples were not read thoroughly since the topic was uninteresting or unrelated to their topic.

It showed that students needed more authentic examples from research journals. The examples should be used to give students real good writing models. That is very useful in the first stage of product-based writing.

Initially, "Familiarization writing" makes learners aware of certain features of a text" (Badger & White, 2002). Then, the process will continue to the controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing which allows students to use the writing skill as a part of a genuine activity.

It should be emphasized that students should experience in analyzing the writing model to get deeper understandings on the writing structure, not the content. Students should be directed to collect texts, work with texts by analyzing wider context of use and meaning, analyzing organization and structure of the text, and analyzing its lexico-grammatical choices (Friedrich, 2008). As a result, students will not reject it due to uninteresting topic or unrelated topic, but they would accept it due to the useful writing outline.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The Academic Writing course syllabus was implemented in accordance with the learning objectives, in terms of the teaching materials, classroom exercises, home assignments, and final projects given to the students. However, the students' result in exercises, assignments, and final projects showed that some items evaluated were still not accomplished as what had been taught in the teaching materials. And it was triggered by the fact that students had lack of the sense of 'accustomed to' in learning the format of writing. And they also had lack of the sense of ideas for writing, such as introduction and literature review.

Thus, to acquire both senses, it was suggested that students immersed in sustainable tasks demanding standardized format and reading exposure not only in the Academic Writing course, but also in other courses. Furthermore, the teaching materials should also be supported with the authentic models of good writings. Students should be required to read and analyze the model so that they get familiar to writing in terms of using the standardized format, and also developing ideas.

Those issues should also be supported by the role of both the lecturer and the students. The intervention of the lecturer is still essential in preparing the teaching materials before the class and in carrying them out during the class. The lecturer should provide sufficient examples, feedback, and support in order to help student accomplish the expected learning objectives. And the students' preparation before the class is also required so that they had adequate background knowledge which was ready to be enriched during the class.

Hence, the implementation of the Academic Writing course syllabus was described on how the teaching materials, classroom exercises, and final paper were actualized in accordance with the learning objectives. And also, it was specifically perceived on how the teaching materials, classroom exercises, and home assignments were interrelated one to another. Suggestions for the teaching learning process goes both to the lecturer as the facilitator and students.

Besides concepts, exercises and home assignments, authentic hands-on materials are very much needed. Active interactions must also come from students. Classroom experience only is limited. In the case of academic writing, it is also suggested that the format be compulsory in writing essays and assignments of other courses.

This ex post facto study did not observe the learning and teaching process. It is suggested that a further research be done also to both the lecturer and the students teaching and learning activities as a main aspect of learning.

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