CHARACTERISTICS OF EFL STUDENTS' RESEARCH PROPOSALS: HOW RESEARCH STUDENTS ESTABLISH THEIR RESEARCH TERRITORY

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Abstract. This study investigates characteristics of EFL students' academic writing, particularly students research proposals. This study aims to uncover how novice researchers introduce their research topics within the larger research area. In particular, this study focuses on how students establish their research territory in the introductory parts of their proposals. This study focuses on students' knowledge and preparation for conducting scientific research and the structural characteristics of students' research proposals. The study is based in Swales' (1990) CARS Model for research article organization. This descriptive qualitative study involves 136 student proposals collected from 6th semester bachelor students majoring in English who enrolled in Research of Language classes in four academic years 2014/2015, 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. Analysis of students' topics indicates that most students are not yet well-prepared for conducting research. Analysis of the structural characteristics of the proposal also shows that students lacked substantial knowledge on research area or disciplines as well as scientific writing, particularly research writing, that detriment their success for entering the research community. Serious pedagogical and training efforts need to be done to improve students' ability and preparation for research.

Keywords: *research writing, EFL student proposal structure, territory establishment*

INTRODUCTION

A scientific research process and reporting its results are significant in communication of scientific community. Efforts to improve mastery of English have been done and has particularly been focused on improvement of English language mastery and student's academic essays (see for instance, Tukan, 1991; Setyaningsih, 1993; Wahab, 1995; Harjanto, 1999, Harno, 2012). Even Harno emphasizes on the need to introduce principles of scientific journal writing to university students early. Encouragement from the government for productive scientific publication has been announced that Indonesia aims to become the foremost country for scientific publication in South-east Asia region in 2019 (Merdeka.com,

July 2, 2018). In 2018, scientific publication has increased substantially and about 18.000 scientific journals have operated in Indonesia by June 2018. This has placed Indonesia at the second country in the region for journal publication. More efforts from higher education are expected to increase scientific publication.

From the scientific activity viewpoint, a scientific research and its reporting is an important educational process in higher education or universities. The institution acts as "a training place" of students of the Indonesian future scientists. Scientific work is one documentation form of student's scientific activity. In the curriculum of S-1 Program at UNTAG Surabaya, a scientific work is the climax of the whole educational process that proves the

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completion of the 8-semester education program in the strata. In the English Department, scientific work to be produced should be written in English, the language of expertise and skills expected of the graduates from the Department. Preparations necessary for students to be able to produce some scientific work during and particularly at the end of their study include providing courses for research, comprising Research Method, Research on Language and Research on Literature, prior to conducting an individual final research project or thesis. The first course is given on the sixth semester, while the other two on the seventh semester.

Some observation to the Research on Language classes in the first two meetings, that the students were given information and task of what they would expect, as well as what would be expected from them in the subject, indicates that the sixth and seventh semester students at the English Department are not yet ready for research.

A number of factors may affect the condition, including students' lack of preparation and knowledge of the research area, which may be due to their lack of information of both the contents of the courses and, more importantly, their lack of ideas and practical skills on research activities. Lack of knowledge of the research area will result in student's inability to select a particular topic of research in the area, while lack of practical skills on research preparation and writing restrains them from producing both a good and sound research proposal and a research report. Another factor could be access to scientific publication and other sources of scientific research reports on which they could base their research plan or proposal.

This study aims at investigating the ability of the English Department students to prepare for a scientific research proposal and the structural characteristics of the proposal. The study is expected to give better insights of

student's research activities, and strategies for improvement may be designed.

English scientific writing requires attention to some important points, including, reader expectancy, scientific convention, organizational structure and language convention (Knaggs, 2001). Thus editing process in writing is necessary (Enago Academy, 2018). Such knowledge on writing stages helps the researcher, particularly those of non-native English speakers, to successfully acculturate into their scientific community (Al-Khasawneh, 2017).

Approaches to English scientific research writing has been widely developed in "genre-based analysis" in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts, pioneered by Swales (1981, 1990). This approach emphasizes on scientific work organization, both for research articles for publication and manuscripts, a form of communicative relation between the writer and the scientific community comprising of researchers and experts in the disciplines. Such communication is manifested in stages or "moves" that build the structure of a scientific report.

There are two notions in Swales' approach: discourse community and genre. A discourse community is "socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals" (Swales, 1990:9). One of the characteristics of the members of this community has been "familiarity with the particular genres that are used in the communicative furtherance of those set goals" (ibid.). A genre is, therefore, part of the research community.

Swales' CARS (Create-a-Research-Space) model for research introduction in English comprises three moves, each being a functional idea to carry the task of each text unit (McKinlay, 1984, in Swales, 1990). In other words, each part of the unit in the article text carries a special function to support the whole purposes of the article. The three moves are: establishing a

territory, establishing the niche and occupying a niche. Each move is further divided into specific obligatory, alternative, and optional steps. preferences in the steps indicate the possibility of variation in the structure of Introduction section. The three moves indicate strategies taken by the researcher to establish the statements of their research in the wider research community.

The first move, establishing a territory, establishes his or her research area by orienting their readers to the well-established knowledge. This move involves three steps: centrality claims, making topic generalisation and reviewing items from the previous research. The first step, centrality claims, links the research topic to be investigated with what has been established in the wider research area and with a more general state of knowledge. This step is linguistically signalled with vocabulary items indicating the interest, importance of the topic, favorite issues or amount of research being done in the area. The second step, making topic generalisation "expresses in general terms the current state of the art--of knowledge, of technique, or … the current requirements for further progress" (Swales, 1990:146). This step is identified in statements about knowledge or practice, and statements about phenomena.

The third step, reviewing items from the previous research, shows the researcher's need to specify previous findings to a certain amount of detail (specification), to attribute the researchers who published those results (attribution), and to state their positions or stance toward the findings (stance) (Ibid.).
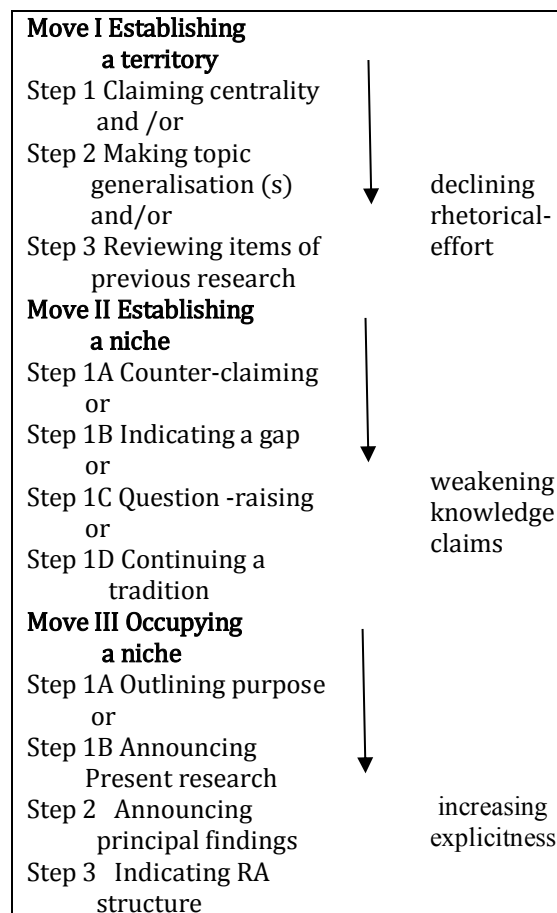
The second move, establishing a niche, describes the researcher's efforts to establish the specific topic of study by pointing to missing information from previous studies. This strategy is categorized into four alternative steps: Counter-claiming, Indicating a gap, Question-raising, or Continuing a tradition.

The third move, occupying a niche, "justifies the present article" (Swales, 1990:159).

This Move consists of three steps: Move III-1: Outlining purposes (henceforth Move III-1A) and announcing present research Announcing principal findings, and Indicating the structure of the research article.

Swales's CARS model is outlined in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1. Swales' CARS model

Move I Establishing a territory
Step 1 Claiming centrality and /or
Step 2 Making topic generalisation (s) and/or
Step 3 Reviewing items of previous research
Move II Establishing a niche
Step 1A Counter-claiming or
Step 1B Indicating a gap or
Step 1C Question -raising or
Step 1D Continuing a tradition
Move III Occupying a niche
Step 1A Outlining purpose or
Step 1B Announcing Present research
Step 2 Announcing principal findings
Step 3 Indicating RA structure

declining rhetorical-effort

weakening knowledge claims

increasing explicitness

Swales's model is adopted to evaluate students' research proposals in the present study. Some variations of the order of the steps are expected in research proposals due to some writing convention in the text type.

METHODS

This descriptive qualitative study is part of a research and development study to improve

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the quality of students' research proposal writing at the English Department of UNTAG Surabaya. The study qualitatively describes students' knowledge and preparation for research activities, which during their study are programmed in subjects on research. The data were taken from two sources: first, a task given to research class students to write their topic or title of research plan. This first data group was analyzed to find out students' preparation for attending research classes, by identifying whether they proposed an interesting and "up-to-date" research topics/titles. The second data group comprises research proposals submitted as the mid-term task in the research classes. The research students involved in the study were 136, comprising those enrolling in the Research on Language classes in the academic years of 2014/2015, 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. The second data group, students' research proposals, were structurally analyzed with Swales' model to find out students' knowledge and familiarity of functional-structural stages of research proposal writing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the first data group involves 59 statements of research titles or topics the students submitted in the first two weeks of the classroom meetings. This number, which is less than a half of the total proposals analyzed in this study, shows that research students were unable to produce a topic or title of a proposed future research. This may be due to their lack of preparation for research activities that are expected from them as they attended research classes.

Analysis of the second data group involves 136 research proposals. Using Swales' model, these proposals show at least eight (8) groups, based on the occurrence of Swales' moves-steps elements in the data. Those 8 groups show varying structures, in this study coded with the Swales' steps:
A. s-1/s-2 + s-3 + C+s-1,

B. s-2+s-3+C+s-1,
C. s-2+C+s-1,
D. General statement+s-2+C+s-1,
E. Data Source+s-2+C+s-1,
F. s-2,
G. s-3, and
H. General statement+C

The occurrence of each type in the data is summed in Table 1.

Diagram 2. Occurrence of structure type

No.	Type	Number of proposal	%
1	A	4	2.94
2	B	48	35.29
3	C	33	24.26
4	D	34	25.00
5	E	2	1.47
6	F	9	6.61
7	G	3	2.20
8	H	3	2.20
Total		136	

The first five groups show a three-move structure with varying elements of steps in each move. The last three groups show incomplete structure, consisting only one or two steps of the whole three-move structure.

A. Students' preparation for research

Analysis on students' preparation for research in the first meetings' task indicates that most of the students have very limited idea or understanding of research classes they were about to attend. This is shown in their being unprepared to select a specific research topic and outline their research framework. It is possible that they also have very limited information and/or knowledge of the research area or disciplines and of recent research published in journals and other forms of publication, on which they could base their research. In other words, they seem to be unfamiliar with recent research development in

specific disciplines from which they could have started their research interests.

More importantly, most of them seem to be unfamiliar to the logical stages that are common in written communication with research community in specific disciplines. Such logical stages to introduce a research topic to the world or community of research in particular discipline determine the starting point in their choice of proposal writing strategies. The initial part of the proposal is important to orientate the research community who reads the proposal and identifies the position of the topic of the study in relation to the state of the research area. It is, therefore, essential to establish at the initial section of the proposal how the research community readership should place the research within a wider research area, and how the community could identify the researcher's scholarship in the discipline.

B. Characteristics of Students' Proposals

As stated in the Introduction section, Swales' CARS model has three obligatory moves, and some obligatory, complementary and optional steps. The eight (8) groups of students' proposal structures found in this study show that, in general, the students have not yet gained settled knowledge on these structural-functional aspects of scientific research writing.

The first group, s-1/s-2 + s-3 + C+s-1, means that the proposal shows three moves: the first move being filled with step 1 or step 2, and step 3; the second move with Question-raising, and the third move with purpose statement. This group shows the most complete structure of Swales' model for Introduction section. As less than 3% of the proposals show this complete structure, this could indicate that most research students are still unfamiliar with the basic functional structure of the research proposal.

The second group, s-2+s-3+C+s-1, also has three moves, yet this group show a different characteristic of step-2: this step contains several paragraphs on description of the

discipline, definitions, and other basic concepts about the discipline. Consequently, the proposal takes more paragraphs and is unnecessarily longer before it introduces the topic of the study and recent research in the area. About 35% of the proposals show this structure, which may indicate that many research students consider it important to establish their understanding on the discipline, before focusing on the specific research topic in the discipline. In fact, such points need not take much space in the proposal, since the purpose of Move 1-step 2 is orienting the readers to information that lays the relevant disciplinary concepts on which the proposed research meets "the current requirements for further progress," not merely to display the writer's static knowledge of the research area. The impact of this model is that topic introduction is delayed and not to the point. For those readers who wish to know the topic soon after the first paragraph, this structure gives an impression of slow development.

The third group, s-2+C+s-1, also shows three moves structure, similar to the second group above, except that this group does not include any review of previous studies. The amount of 24.26% of the proposals organized in such a way shows that the students are not aware of the importance of review of past studies in the establishment of the communication convention between the researcher and the research community.

Absence of such a review may also show unfamiliarity of the students to the recent development of research in the discipline. This absence is also the weakest point of a scientific research, because it indicates that the researcher is unfamiliar with the research community into which he or she wishes to join, to gain acceptance and acknowledgement of his or her scholarships in the research area.

The fourth group, General statement+s-2+C+s-1, occurs in 25% of the data, begins with general statements that are often irrelevant or too general to be considered as some scientific

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statements because they cannot be directly related to any specific research area or interests. Such general statements as People need language to communicate, Language is a means of communication, and the like, seem to orientate only common readerships on the purpose and direction of research, while the actual expert readers of the proposal, such as lecturers, researchers or even proposal selection team who have good knowledge of the topic would consider the information flow too slow and excessively trivial. Moreover, such a writing style is also uncommon to academic style, and it may be more often used in general popular science. Thus, this group shows inappropriate English written scientific communication style.

The fifth group, Data Source+s-2+C+s-1, begins the proposal with information on either the data source or data type, followed by orientation to the research area and research questions and purpose of the study. Only two proposals show this structure, which indicates that now many students consider introducing data and data source at the early section of the proposal as a good writing strategy. Also this model is in contrast with the standard model of academic writing (that begins with general statements then narrowing down to specific statements), while the structure in this group begins with specific followed by some general information.

The sixth, seventh and eighth groups indicate incomplete proposals. These three groups comprise about 11% of the whole data. The similarity of these three groups is that each group only has one element of structure, either Move 1-step 2 (general statements of the research area or discipline), Move 1-step 3 (reviewing previous studies), or general statement and question. They all indicate that some students have no idea about scientific research procedure, while only presenting very limited information of research. The findings on these groups also indicate that research students are unfamiliar with research articles and journals

which form the basis for them to construct a scientific research. They may only read textbooks where they learn basic concepts of a discipline and are unable to develop further ideas for research from the basic concepts. Such shortcomings in academic knowledge and attitude need serious efforts for change on the part of the students and educators. Such students need to actively dig knowledge and insights on the nature of scientific research, research procedure as well as research writing for themselves. They also need to build some form of "research literacy", that they need to begin to familiarize themselves with recent studies and published articles in relevant disciplines and research areas.

Scientific community comprises "socio-historical networks" formed together to reach common goals (Swales, 1990:9). This community is characterized with memberships of expertise of scientific specialization, whose members use the same language, having the same beliefs and practices (Kuhn, 1970). Such similarities are due to similar educational starts and profession, that they have taken same educations, and that they have same goals and professional considerations, and that their communication is full (Flowerdew, 2000).

Some strategies may be offered for improvement, among others, encouraging students to learn for themselves the philosophical basis of the nature of written scientific communication, orienting students with the nature of written academic communication, particularly communication among expertise in particular disciplines, and on practical basis, facilitating students with both facilities and tasks on academic writing and research writings.

CONCLUSION

Some generalizations may be drawn from this study. First, lack of knowledge and preparation on the part of the research students needs serious efforts on the part of teaching-

learning processes prior to their enrollment in research classes, to provide them with necessary information and skills on philosophical, characteristics and practical aspects of written scientific communication among researchers. Second, "research literacy" should be introduced to university students: research students need both theoretical and practical knowledge of aspects of technical scientific writings, function and structure as well as language convention pertaining scientific communication. Knowledge on standard, or preferred structure of research writing. Third, strategies to improve proposal quality of English Department research students may be proposed to include facilitating and encouraging students to update themselves with recent research development in disciplines. Finaly, research students need exercises on practical aspects of research writing, while at the same time enriching their own knowledge on various elements of academic writing, such as formal, technical, academic vocabulary, knowledge of standard academic communication function.

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