

# Evaluating Students' Engagement in Feedback through an Academic Literacy Approach

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## Abstract

In the context of higher education, the development of academic literacy is crucial in enhancing students' ability to use academic language for critical thinking and information analysis. This ability serves as the foundation for effective academic writing skills. This study highlights the challenges faced by students in the Faculty of Education at Lambung Mangkurat University regarding academic literacy, including difficulties in explaining the background of the problem, formulating research objectives clearly, and developing coherent arguments. Furthermore, the importance of academic literacy practices in a social context is emphasized, where students need to identify valued communication practices within specific disciplines. The research findings indicate that learning activities are still focused on learning objectives that overlook academic literacy practices. Therefore, it is essential for educators to provide constructive feedback to students to help them develop an academic identity that aligns with teachers' expectations.

**Keywords:** Academic language, academic literacy, critical thinking, cognitive processing.

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## BACKGROUND

Efforts to improve the quality of human resources in the face of globalization is a challenge that must be answered with real work by the world of education. This is because science education, in particular, has a very strategic role in efforts to prepare human resources in the era of globalization and industrialization. This potential will be realized if science education can produce reliable students and grow the ability to think logically and critically, take the initiative, and be adaptive to changes and developments that can be proven by producing academic work.

The use of academic language mediates the product of students' academic work. Students' educational progress is characterized by the ability to use language for cognition and critical analysis. Academic language is filled with cognitive and analytical processing, serving for exposition, clarification, and conclusion. The academic demands of language require users to explain, define, compare, contrast, classify, illustrate, describe, make claims, see implications, infer, exemplify, anticipate, and conclude. This ability is operationally and measurably expressed as academic literacy.

It is necessary to pay attention to these abilities to grow academic literacy before arriving at writing literacy skills: The ability to collect academic information (listen or read), discuss something further, and the ability to analyze from peripheral information processing, and finally, the ability to generate new information (in writing) that captures the final opinion of the learner himself.

Ability to handle complexity in multiple domains, identify and solve problems, collect data, evaluate, use oral and written communication skills, and work with technology, describing the characteristics of academic literacy. Gravelt and Kinchin (2020) stated that it could be done by using academic reference practices to develop student identity in higher education.

Adding to this, Benzie and Harper (2019) stated that academic literacy practice in a social context involves identifying the types of communicative practices in building written and reasoning forms that academics and professionals in the discipline value. The complex context places a perspective that assumes that university students are equipped with writing skills that can be used to write about a discipline. However, a significant challenge is that the norms and values of such

a discipline often remain tacit, latent in the text, and difficult for academics to articulate explicitly to students.

Those challenges stated above are also found in Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Lambung Mangkurat University students. These difficulties include being unable to describe the background of the problem to express *das sein* and *das sollen*, difficulties in formulating problem formulations, difficulties in analyzing causality/connection between independent and dependent variables, and difficulties in identifying appropriate research methods. These empirical findings indicate that learning activities are oriented towards learning objectives that override academic literacy practice. The learning process has not yet revealed creative research ideas in the form of writing. Learning to write is challenging, but teaching writing becomes an even more significant challenge, especially about how we simultaneously teach this process to students struggling with mastery of science content, educational knowledge, logical reasoning, and science in context. In this process, teachers' feedback is crucial, and how the students respond to it define their academic identity to teachers' expectation. Student feedback literacy is 'the ability to read, interpret, and use written feedback' (Sutton, 2012, p. 31) as seen from the academic literacy approach; it involves knowledge building, identity construction, and cognition and actions in using feedback (Han & Xu, 2019). Students' engagement in feedback is characterised by appreciating feedback, making judgments, managing effects, and taking action (Carless & Boud, 2018). In this study, feedback engagement refers to how students follow up to the written corrective feedback, including the understanding, accuracy, and interpretation the students make when they receive feedback. It then pictures up their feedback literacy as it is the component in the academic literacy skill.

### Review of Literature

Academic literacy refers to proficiency in reading and writing about academic subjects. Discussing and analyzing formal, specific academic subjects enables literate individuals to contribute productively to ongoing conversations within specific academic areas.

The component of academic literacy needs to be recognized for assessing student competence for academic purposes. The components of academic literacy in preparing an educational research proposal include the ability to understand various academic vocabulary in context, understand the relationship between different parts of a text, interpret various types of texts (genres). Another abilities are interpret, use and generate information presented in graphic or visual format, make a distinction between essential and non-essential information, propositions and arguments. Adding to that, the ability to distinguish between cause and effect, classify, categorize and handle data that makes comparisons, estimate and perform simple

numerical calculations relevant to academic information, which allows comparisons to be made, and can be applied for argument purposes, and knows what is considered evidence for an argument.

Writing strategies on student learning to generate research ideas and topics in preparing research proposals are more complex and need to be taught properly. Research conducted by Abadiano & Turner (2004), illustrates that using direct and explicit instructions, dialogue during the writing process, and modeling is an integrated approach that needs to be developed. Initial abilities, organizational structure abilities, and reservoirs of rich vocabulary become the fulcrum of students' writing skills.

Feedback strategies are found in the research of Stierer (2000), Hyatt (2005), and journal articles by Horstmanshof and Brownie (2013). Stierer and Hyatt, put more emphasis on task requirements, aspects of academic writing, ideas, and arguments. While Horstmanshof and Brownie that providing timely feedback through formative assessment will help students with various abilities to acquire academic writing skills. In addition, it was suggested that in the scaffolding strategy, students need to be counseled about the value of sharing work and the benefits of working in a collegial learning environment and focusing on the progressive development of writing skills.

Research by Randall and Mirador (2003), who conducted an investigation using corpus-based analysis, reported that giving written feedback academic conventions identified fourteen themes which were then grouped into three categories. The three categories are content knowledge, process knowledge, and academic format.

## METHOD

This study was conducted in a scientific paper writing module consisting of five sessions of 120 minutes each. The participants were two full-time students of the Science Education Department. Data was collected through interviews (the first interview to gather background information and the second interview for supporting data) and class documentation (proposal draft submitted by students). Data were collected from students' written proposal draft with written feedback and semi-structured individual interview. The instrument used was an evaluation sheet to evaluate the responses to feedback in research proposal writing. The students' prior feedback experience was that they received feedback only when they had a face-to-face meeting with their supervisor, never did any peer review, received only general feedback as a whole (no detailed feedback), and infrequently reviewed the revision done after receiving feedback. The criteria assessed in this study were as follows:

**Table 1: Students' feedback engagement criteria**

| No | Criteria             | Aspects   |
|----|----------------------|---|
| 1  | Problem Background   | specifically address gaps in the literature, inadequate topic consideration, or other deficiencies.   |
|    |                      | Show that the proposal is built on assumptions from the results of previous research.   |
|    |                      | Show that the research problem has not been answered or can determine the problem has been answered ineffectively, and thus become better at finding alternative answers to problems related to the topic   |
|    |                      | Refer to credible references to support an idea or ideas  |
|    |                      | define the research problem) in a clear and structured manner.  |
|    |                      | Explain what is proposed (objectives) in a clear and structured manner  |
|    |                      | Develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research  |
|    |                      | The description presents the more general aspects of the initial topic of the introduction, then narrows the analysis to more specific topical information that provides context, ending with the research problem  |
|    |                      | Focus on the research problem and do not go on unrelated tangents   |
| 2  | Literature Review    | A description of the potential results that the proposed research could reveal  |
|    |                      | Demonstrate a more deliberate review and synthesis of previous research related to the research problem under investigation   |
|    |                      | State the recommendations of previous research results, questions asked by other researchers, the methods used, and the proposal writer's (your) understanding of the findings of previous studies.   |
|    |                      | Express opposition to previous research conclusions and discloses that previous research has failed to adequately examine the issues addressed in (your) research proposal  |
|    |                      | systematic, logical, concise, relevant, and able to underlie research problems  |
| 3  | Research Method      | Use up-to-date, problem-relevant, and primary references.   |
|    |                      | quantitative research methods with research designs are available   |
|    |                      | Identify the logical steps to be taken to achieve the research objectives   |
|    |                      | Design a comprehensive research study, discussing anticipated problems and the steps taken to prevent them from occurring. For each problem that arose, there were described ways to minimize it or why the problem did not affect the finding interpretation in a meaningful way.  |
|    |                      | Research methods and tools/instruments are used to identify and collect information from the variables studied. Explain the data collection methods, such as surveys, interviews, questionnaires, observations, and archive research. If analyzing existing data, such as data sets or archival documents, who and how were they created, and explain how old data is still relevant for investigating current research problems. |
|    |                      | Research instruments/tools and strategies are used to study hypotheses and the research questions that underlie them  |
|    |                      | Demonstrate how to process data and the procedures used to analyze data: Statistic analysis and theoretical perspective to help analyze the text or explain the observed behavior, a plan to obtain an accurate assessment of the relationships, patterns, trends, distributions, and possible contradictions found in the data.  |
|    |                      | Demonstrate potential limitations: there are practical limitations that may affect the collection of your data; control for potential confounding variables and errors. State this openly and show why pursuing this methodology outweighs the risk of this problem arising.  |
|    |                      | Demonstrates justification for subject selection and sampling procedures, selecting a sample population.  |
|    |                      | Provide background and reasons for the methodology that is unfamiliar to the reader.  |
| 4  | Language and grammar | use correct Indonesian spelling based on PUEBI (General Indonesian Spelling Guidelines)   |
|    |                      | Use the writing format following the applicable Scientific Writing Guidelines   |
|    |                      | show consistency of writing format and language   |
|    |                      | Sloppy or imprecise writing, or poor grammar. Too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on big issues  |
|    |                      | a concise, engaging and well-written introduction will make your readers think highly of your analytical skills, writing style and research approach  |

The data collection process was as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: data collection procedures**

| No | Session | Activity  |
|----|---------|---|
| 1  | Week 1  | Introduction to scientific writing and criteria                                       |
| 2  | Week 2  | First interview   |
| 3  | Week 3  | First draft assigned  |
| 4  | Week 4  | First draft returned with written feedback from the lecturer<br>Second draft assigned |
| 5  | Week 5  | Final interview   |

The data analysis process was text and content analysis done by the researcher as the lecturer, referring to the criteria presented in table 1. Text analysis was done to evaluate students' understanding of feedback and how they engage with it showing their feedback literacy

skills. Through text analysis, the revision done by students based on the written feedback was assessed and categorised in revision quality: correct, substitution, deletion, incorrect, and no revision. Each quality is presented in scores 1 to 4 as follows.

**Table 3: Revision quality score**

| No | Aspect               | Quality      | Score (g) |
|----|----------------------|--------------|-----------|
| 1  | Problem Background   | Correct      | 5         |
|    |                      | Substitution | 4         |
|    |                      | Deletion     | 3         |
|    |                      | Incorrect    | 2         |
|    |                      | No Revision  | 1         |
| 2  | Literature Review    | Correct      | 5         |
|    |                      | Substitution | 4         |
|    |                      | Deletion     | 3         |
|    |                      | Incorrect    | 2         |
|    |                      | No Revision  | 1         |
| 3  | Research Method      | Correct      | 5         |
|    |                      | Substitution | 4         |
|    |                      | Deletion     | 3         |
|    |                      | Incorrect    | 2         |
|    |                      | No Revision  | 1         |
| 4  | Language and grammar | Correct      | 5         |
|    |                      | Substitution | 4         |
|    |                      | Deletion     | 3         |
|    |                      | Incorrect    | 2         |
|    |                      | No Revision  | 1         |

For details, correct means that the revision was done precisely as recommended in the written feedback. Meanwhile, substitution means that students did revision by changing some parts but not precisely as recommended in the written feedback. Deletion refers to the revision done by deleting the part which was recommended to revise. Incorrect means that students revised but in incorrect term. Lastly, no revision

represents there was part recommended to be revised but students did no revision on it. On the other hand, the written feedback was done by underlining and circling the parts to be revised, adding a brief note to the error, or both.

**Findings:** Research findings are presented in the table below

**Table 4: Research findings**

| No | Participant | Aspect               | Revisions | Score (g) |
|----|-------------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1  | Nor         | Problem background   | 2         | 4         |
|    |             | Literature review    | 4         | 4         |
|    |             | Research method      | 1         | 5         |
|    |             | Language and grammar | 2         | 4         |
| 2  | Tina        | Problem background   | 5         | 4         |
|    |             | Literature review    | 3         | 5         |
|    |             | Research method      | 4         | 4         |
|    |             | Language and grammar | 4         | 5         |

### **Nor: Underlining and Circling Feedback Is All About Sensitivity**

Nor was an active student during the class. She tended to speak while the others resisted responding whenever the lecturer asked for some responses. Like others, Nor did not expect that she would have to make a research proposal draft on a scientific writing module, but she enjoyed writing it. As for the feedback, she was happy with the feedback she received but got confused on some indirect feedback (underline and circle):

[interview]

Researcher: How do you feel about the feedback?

Nor: Quite good, but I suppose that I still made some mistakes in some parts.

Researcher: Oh, really? Why do you think so?

Nor: Well.. it is quite hard to understand this kind of feedback (pointing to underlined sentences)

...and also this (pointing to circled words)

Researcher: So, what did you do with these?

Nor: Yeah.. I just guessed, maybe this underline means that it is not clear.. and maybe this circle means that it is wrong.. I think so.. I don't know.

Nor received a minor revision recommendation on her draft. Adding to that, her partial understanding of indirect written feedback leads to her good engagement to feedback. As she translated circle as a wrong term, she tended to substitute the circled words with another synonym rather than delete it. In fact, circle refers to a grammatical error. On the example below, *students* should be changed into *students'*, but Nor changed the phrase.

*Based on the observation, the problem found in school is that students motivation is low in the science classroom.*

⇒ *Based on the observation, the problem found in school is that the motivation of students is low in the science classroom.*

Meanwhile, for the underlined sentences, she added some more information or changed some words to make it more understandable, while actually underlining means that the reference was missing.

*Motivation in learning is affected by the method used in the classroom.*

⇒ *Motivation in learning is affected by the method used in the classroom because of the way the teacher delivers the teaching material in class*

On the other hand, nor found it easier to understand written feedback with underlining or circles and noting the error. Nor responded to the feedback successfully, although she was only guessing on some parts, thanks to her sensitivity. From the result, Nor's responses show her beliefs about the lecturer's role was questionable as she chose to guess the feedback rather than ask about it directly to the lecturer. However,

overall, Nor's engagement with feedback was good as assessed based on the revised proposal draft; her identity was more about following her instinct than the rule.

### **Tina: Engagement to Feedback Supported By Communication**

Tina was an average student in an academic term, but she was very communicative in class. She never hesitated to ask or answer questions from the lecturer. Tina was quite sensitive as she expected to have a proposal writing assignment in a scientific writing module. Hence, she was excited to receive feedback.

[interview]

Researcher: How do you feel about the feedback?

Tina: I think it's exciting to wait for the feedback and it feels good when it arrives

Researcher: Did you receive many feedbacks?

Tina: (inhale) Well.. likely.. more than the others, I guess.. I'm not good at writing, so.. I learned from it

Researcher: Is there any part that confuses you?

Tina: Not really, well I asked the lecturer about the parts he underlined and circled. so. yeah

Tina was quite positive about the many feedbacks she received. Despite the numbers, Tina was more attracted to the feedback itself. However, unlike Nor, Tina was more proactive in asking about her mistakes. She was more likely to rely on the lecturer than take her own initiative to decide.

Tina gained a higher score than Nor as she followed the direction exactly as recommended in the written feedback and some parts were only slightly changed.

*Critical thinking skill refers to how we think of something and the reason why we do it.*

⇒ *Critical thinking skill refers to how we think of something and the reason why we do it (Arisoy & Aybek, 2021).*

The underlined sentence was not completed with an additional note, but Tina revised it successfully because she tended to ask for confirmation from the lecturer, not guessing it. Meanwhile, she changed the sentence structure in some parts, although she had already asked the lecturer about the error.

*Educators need to have multiple knowledge regarding their expertise to be able to educate students to think critically. (note: what kind of knowledge?)*

⇒ *Multiple virtues are essential for educators to be able to educate students to think critically.*

This example does not necessarily show Tina's lack of understanding of the written feedback. In the interview, she said that she changed it because she could not find the references for the 'multiple knowledge', so she cannot elaborate as was demanded in the feedback.

Therefore, she changed it to another term. As she had already asked the lecturer about the error, she chose not to ask another question about alternative revision; she took the initiative to do so.

## DISCUSSION

The study of the two students from the Science Education Department explored their engagement to written feedback and the characteristics of feedback literacy. The similarities between the two are that they give positive responses to the written feedback they received and they found indirect written feedback, such as underlining and circles, confusing and ambiguous. It shows that a brief note or explanation should equip written feedback to help students understand it. In another way, indirect written feedback should be described in the module introduction or discussion to minimize misunderstandings. In the two students' case, they also have some differences mainly in communication and beliefs. While Nor believed more in herself than her lecturer, Tina found that her lecturer was more reliable in solving her problem. Despite being active during the class, they both showed a different approaches to handling the feedbacks they received: Nor used her instinct to guess the parts she did not understand. In contrast, Tina used her communication skill to face such difficulties. As a result, Tina's score for engagement to feedback was higher than Nor's. Supporting this, Carless and Winstone (2020) stated that communication and negotiation after receiving feedback could benefit both teachers and students. Through discussion, feedback could be helpful for students to identify their problems and solve them, and for teachers to build two-way communication with students to support learning activities both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, students' feedback literacy also helps the teacher to develop feedback pedagogy and literacy as teachers could reflect on their feedback delivery and design. Reflecting on the feedback engagement aspects, both Tina and Nor got a slightly similar score as their respective scores were 18 and 17 while the revisions they should have made were 16 and 9, respectively. According to that, the two students' prior academic writing skills show a significant difference as Tina's prior score almost doubles N Nevertheless, the final score was quite similar, showing that their academic writing skills were finally on par. However, the focus was not on the final academic writing skill but on their engagement to feedback. After receiving feedback, they reached the same level of academic writing skills with their respective characteristics to solve the error they made. It shows that both Tina and Nor have gained good feedback literacy ( $\bar{g} \geq 4$ ) despite their own different way of engaging with it. As Winstone *et al.*, (2019) stated, assessing students' feedback engagement should be done by considering individual differences in each student. It is supported by Chong (2021), who stated that "feedback literacy refers to how students carefully manage their emotions and attitudes towards feedback", in which emotion and attitude are personally owned by

each student and cannot be intervened in a wrong way. Therefore, a more in-depth study needs to be done regarding these aspects.

## CONCLUSION

This study illustrates two cases of Science Education Department students whose feedback literacy was assessed through research proposal draft submission and revision. It aims to evaluate their engagement with feedback, referring to how students follow up with the written corrective feedback, including the understanding, accuracy, and interpretation they make when they receive feedback. The result shows that the two students had different approach to performing their engagement to feedback. At the same time, their prior knowledge was significantly different, and their final score of feedback literacy was similar. The study shows that individual students' capacities to respond to feedback were situated by their beliefs in the teacher role and themselves.

While conclusions should be made carefully considering the limitations of research, such as the lack of longitudinal data and the limited scope of case studies. In general, this research contributes to the field of feedback literacy study in several ways. For example, this study provides a narrative account of the link between students' engagement with feedback and communication. Also, it captures the improvement of students' academic writing skills after being given writing feedback. Future research needs to investigate the students' engagement with feedback concerning teachers' feedback literacy.

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