IMPROVING STUDENTS’ WRITING SKILLS THROUGH WRITING JOURNAL ARTICLES

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Abstract:
In Indonesian context, writing is considered as painful activity indicating that oral culture is much better than writing one. The students’ works are sufficiently kept in the libraries, although to publish those is much more worthy. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the students’ writing skills through a meaningful way namely writing journal article. This review article is therefore intended to discuss ways of improving students’ writing skills through writing journal article. The result of consulting different existing related literature can be concluded that the ability of writing can be variously defined based on the pedagogical objectives and approach. Meanwhile, the skill of writing journal article is classified as one of the writing skills derived from Process/Cognitive approach. Amongst the underlying ways to publish the students’ manuscripts is by taking a look at the structure of a journal article, the writing guide and the writing style of a journal publication to which the manuscript is intended to publish. By implementing the above mentioned tips of writing a journal article, the EFL students will not only improve their writing skills but make their works much worthy as well. In a nutshell, in addition to publish the students’ works, to write journal article is essential to improve their writing skills.

Keywords: writing skills, writing journal articles, pedagogical approach of writing
College EFL students are engaged a lot in doing school projects which might be done through research such as course projects as approved in the course contracts or final research project to fulfill their Bachelor degree (Pedoman Penyelenggaraan Pendidikan, 2015). Their projects results are actually useful for either enriching their own knowledge and experience or contributing to a certain related field of science if they are published so that everybody can easily accessed. However, what has been commonly done by students towards their works is documenting their works in the form of research reports which are commonly kept in the library or thrown away. Their research results become less meaningful, because they have not been read or they are only read by a certain group of society- usually their younger generation intakes. To make the students’ works be more meaningful, they need to be communicated and disseminated in conferences or seminars and publish them in journal articles. The main problem of not publishing their works is that they do not really know how to compose articles for journals. This indicates the critical needs of equipping the students with the strategies and tips of writing journal articles. Hence, this article is intended to discuss the skills of writing, the conceptual understanding of journal articles and their characteristics, and strategies of writing journal articles. This is not only essential to improve their writing skills, particularly the skill of writing journal article, but to contribute to the advancement of related research-based knowledge.

WRITING SKILLS

It is believed that writing is important and frequently used in people’s daily lives either as individual such as writing application letter, messages, and dissemination of the research results or member of society such as in a workplace issues. Writing is also taught in formal education considering the importance of having ability and good skills of writing. Yet, it is not easy to define the ability of writing. There are various definitions of writing ability according to different approaches of the teaching of writing. As
mentioned in Yi (2009), there are three approaches, namely Product/Text Oriented Approach, Process/Cognitive-Oriented Approach, and Genre-Based Approach.

According to Text-Oriented Approach, writing ability is viewed as the capacity to produce “acontextually” (Hyland in Yi, 2009) correct forms of language; following prescribed patterns at either sentence or discourse level. Meanwhile, on the basis of Process/Cognitive Approach which is focused on what the writer does during the process of writing (Nunan in Yi, 2009), writing ability is defined to initiate and evolve ideas and then use certain revising and editing practices to develop them to maturity in a given context. A teacher who believes this view encourage students to develop power over their own writing without being directive, assuming that writing is a creative act and that the process is important as a discovery of the true self (Berlin in Yi, 2009). As Grabe and Kaplan in Yi (2009) note that learners are encouraged to look for their own authentic voices and freely express them. Accordingly, the writing activities are like to be personal essays and journal writing which are suitable for self discovery (Johns in Yi, 2009).

Indeed, from this point of view, the writing ability is defined as the ability to express oneself freely. Finally, in accordance to Genre-Based Approach which stressed on awareness of the readers, regards successful writers as those who are able to make reasonable assumptions about what the reader knows and expects, to seek a balance between their writing purpose, and to satisfy a given discourse community with regard to the structure and content of the discourse and communicate functionally. In short, there are several theoretical definitions of writing ability from different pedagogical approaches with which English teachers can consider establishing definition appropriate with their own pedagogical needs.

So, what essential writing skills which college students should obtain particularly in regard to be an effective citizen and productive employee? As resulted from research done by Jones (1994), there are a number of critical writing skills that should be possessed by college students. They are *audience*
awareness i.e. the ability to develop a representation of the potential readers of a text; purpose for writing i.e. the ability to use vocabulary appropriate to the subject and purpose(s); pre-writing activity i.e. the ability to discuss a piece of writing with someone to clarify what students wish to say; organizing i.e. the ability to clearly organize and structure a document namely the ability to include clear statements of the main ideas and to maintain coherence within sentences and among sentences, paragraphs, and sections of a piece of writing; drafting i.e. the ability to avoid common grammatical error of standard written English, to quote accurately, to establish and maintain a focus, to write effective introductions and conclusions, to write effectively under pressure and meet deadline, to make general and specific revisions, to move between reading and revising to emphasize key points, and refine the motion of audiences as they write; collaborating i.e. the ability to write collaboratively, to delegate writing to others, criticize others’ drafts, and to seek drafts’ critiques from others; and revising i.e. the ability to correct grammar problems, revise to improve word choices, reduce awkward phrasing and vague language, and select, add, substitute or delete information for a specified audience. Those skills of writing are important to help English learners to write journal article correctly and effectively.

CONCEPTUAL IDEA OF JOURNAL ARTICLES

Students with their abundant ideas of doing scientific activities such as reviewing some literature to achieve a certain intended ideas of their school assignments, doing mini research among themselves, and doing final projects assigned by their lectures- have been trapped in a “belief” that writing their works in an article which is feasibly published is difficult and intimidating. Besides, the fact shows that among Indonesian students, oral culture controls over writing culture. This matter might be rooted from their lack of understanding of what journal articles are. The very first step to be able to write a journal article- recognizing the conceptual idea of journal article- is rarely done. “Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself; but
“talent instantly recognizes genius” Doyle’s Quote in Sherlock Holmes, ”It is believed that everybody has something “in their locker”, but how to make it open, seen, and read. So, putting the students’ scientific works down in a scientific or an academic paper is necessary.

A scientific paper as according to Day (1983), is a written and published report describing original research results. By definition, it is a particular kind of document containing certain specified kinds of information which demands exactly the same qualities of thought as are needed for the rest of science: logic, clarity, and precision. It is a means of communicating scientific inquiry. Hence, scientific paper should meet the requirements of how the paper is written and how it is published. It can be operationally defined that a scientific article as stated by Belt et.al. (2011) must answer the basic questions below:

a. What is the problem that is addressed?
b. Why is it important?
c. How are the problems studied?
d. What are the results?
e. What are the implications of the results?
f. What is recommended as further studies for others?

In short, a scientific article is written by scientists for a scholarly audience in a clear and logical structure combined with fluent story telling. In order that this scientific article to be a journal article or a peer-reviewed journal article, it must not only have scientific qualities, but it must be checked by other scientists before publication. A journal article is then defined as short papers on specific topics in which researchers report their research findings, critical analyses, and new ideas.

The second step to consider after writing a scientific paper is to check whether a target journal in mind publishes the written manuscript. Yet, in accordance Belt et.al (2011), to decide on a target journal during the very early stages of writing a scientific article is beneficial rather than writing an article then followed by considering where to send the article. When
selecting the targeted journal, it is important to conduct an analysis of the purpose and mission of the journal, and examine what types of article which is typically published. Understanding types of scientific publication will also be meaningful. Majumder (2015) states that there are some the possible types of scientific publications, such as original research, review article, clinical case study, clinical trial, perspective, opinion, and commentary.

**Original Research**

These are detailed studies reporting original research and are classified as primary literature. They include hypothesis, background study, methods, results, interpretation of findings, and a discussion of possible implications. Original research articles are long, with the word limit ranging from 3000 to 6000 and can even go up to 12000 words for some journals. These require a significant investment of time.

**Review Article**

It gives an overview of existing literature in a field, often identifying specific problems or issues and analyzing information from available published work on the topic with a balanced perspective. These are considered as secondary literature and can be a particularly efficient way for early career researchers to begin publishing. Review articles can be of three types, broadly speaking: literature reviews, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. Review articles are usually long, with the maximum word limit being 3000-5000 or even more, depending on the journal. However, some journals also publish short reviews.

**Clinical Case Study**

Clinical case studies present the details of real patient cases from medical or clinical practice. The cases presented are usually those that contribute significantly to the existing knowledge on the field. The study is expected to discuss the signs, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of a disease. These are considered as primary literature and usually have a word
count similar to that of an original article. Clinical case studies require a lot of practical experience and may not be a suitable publication format for early career researchers.

**Clinical Trial**

Once again, specific to the field of medicine, clinical trials describe the methodology, implementation, and results of controlled studies, usually undertaken with large patient groups. Clinical trial articles are also long, usually of about the same length as an original research article. Clinical trials also require practical work experience, as well as, high standards of ethics and reliability. So this format is more useful for experienced researchers.

**Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary**

Perspective pieces are scholarly reviews of fundamental concepts or prevalent ideas in a field. These are usually essays that present a personal point of view critiquing widespread notions pertaining to a field. A perspective piece can be a review of a single concept or a few related concepts. These are considered as secondary literature and are usually short articles, around 2000 words. Opinion articles present the author’s viewpoint on the interpretation, analysis, or methods used in a particular study. It allows the author to comment on the strength and weakness of a theory or hypothesis. Opinion articles are usually based on constructive criticism and should be backed by evidence. Such articles promote discussion on current issues concerning science. These are also relatively short articles. Meanwhile, commentaries are short articles usually around 1000-1500 words long that draw attention to or present a criticism of a previously published article, book, or report, explaining why it interested them and how it might be illuminating for readers.

**Book Review**

Book reviews are published in most academic journals. The aim of a book review is to provide insight and opinion on recently published
scholarly books. Book reviews are also relatively short articles and less time-consuming. Book reviews are a good publication option for early career researchers as it allows the researcher to stay abreast of new literature in the field, while at the same time, adding to his publication list.

In addition, Thorn (2015) classifies scientific articles into three types, namely original articles, review article, and theoretical articles. Original article is developed based on the empirical studies and it is about describing the results of a research work. Meanwhile, the critical review is a critical evaluation of previously published studies which is then synthesized, integrated, and organized in a state of the art. And the theoretical article where the author based on existing research presents a new theory, analyze or criticize existing theories.

STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC PAPERS

Scientific papers such as journal article may consist of several structures. It commonly has a standard format consisting of some orderly organized elements i.e. title, abstract, introduction, methods and materials, results, discussion, reference list (Thorn, 2015). Meanwhile, as according to Hourglass Model of scientific paper, it comprises three main parts namely, introduction, body, and discussion (Derntl, 2014). He further modified that model and named it King Model of Scientific Paper with its logical order consisting of Title, Abstract, Introduction, Body, Discussion, and Reference. Yet, Belt et.al.(2011) have a little bit different structure/elements of a journal article, namely Title, Abstract, Introduction, Theory/Literature Review, Research Methods/ Process, Results (sometimes it is divided into results and analysis), and Conclusion. This standard format is helpful for readers to find their expected information.

Title reflects subject and what aspect of the subject studied. Abstract is a brief summary of the article addressing research background, purpose, methods, results and conclusion. Introduction discusses why the study is conducted - background information, niche, aim and problem statements.
Reviewing literature contains the theory supporting the storyline of the article. Research method describes how the study is conducted - the method used, so precisely that it is possible for the reader to follow and repeat the research process. Results tell what is found form the study - a presentation of the results in text and optionally with tables, charts and figures. Discussion/Analysis presents why the results can be significant - the research results and the principles, relationships, or generalizations which are certified by the result of the study. Conclusion presents the main points resulted from the research, the limitation of the study and the implication for the related field of study. Reference list tells all the documents that the author referred to.

TIPS FOR WRITING A JOURNAL ARTICLE

The above mentioned elements and sections of a journal articles can be developed using the following tips.

Title

Title is part of a paper which is first and mostly read. It represents the whole idea of the article. Each scientific paper must have a self-explanatory title with which readers can get the significant points of the paper without reading the whole article. Title of a scientific article is considered as the most important determinant of how many people will read the article. Yet, what to take into account when writing a title of a scientific journal paper. Derntl (2014) further discusses tips of writing a good research paper article:

Condenses the paper’s content in a few words.
Captures the readers’ attention
Differentiates the paper from other papers of the same subject area

There are three basic tips to keep in mind when writing a title (Kukarni, 2013):

a. Keep it simple, brief and attractive: The primary function of a title is to provide a precise summary of the paper’s content. So keep the title brief and clear. Use active verbs instead of complex noun-based phrases, and avoid unnecessary details. Moreover, a good title for a research paper is typically
around 10 to 12 words long. A lengthy title may seem unfocused and take
the readers’ attention away from an important point.

b. Use appropriate descriptive words: A good research paper title
should contain key words used in the manuscript and should define the nature
of the study. Think about terms people would use to search for your study
and include them in your title.

c. Avoid abbreviations and jargon: Known abbreviations such as AIDS,
NATO, and so on can be used in the title. However, other lesser-known or
specific abbreviations and jargon that would not be immediately familiar to
the readers should be left out.

In conclusion, a helpful way of composing the best title of the research
paper is write down the hypothesis and then take into consideration the
above-mentioned simple tips.

Abstract

Abstract informs the most important points of the paper. It is the
only part of the paper reviewed by the potential referee if it is considered
potential to be published by an editor of a journal. It is the only part of the
paper searched through electronic database (Andrade, 2011). Only the readers
with a specific interest of the whole paper obtained after reading the abstract
that will continue reading the paper thoroughly. The abstract is followed by
key words.

Andrade (2011) further explains that although some journals still
publish abstracts that are written as free-flowing paragraphs, most journals
require abstracts to conform to a formal structure within a word count of,
usually, 200–250 words. The usual sections defined in a structured abstract
are the Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusions; other headings with
similar meanings may be used (eg, Introduction in place of Background or
Findings in place of Results). Some journals include additional sections,
such as Objectives (between Background and Methods) and Limitations (at
the end of the abstract).
Background in an abstract should be the shortest part of the abstract and should very briefly outline the following information:

What is already known about the subject, related to the paper in question

What is not known about the subject and hence what the study intended to examine (or what the paper seeks to present).

The background, in some cases, can be framed in only 2–3 sentences, with each sentence describing a different aspect of the information referred to above mentioned outline of the background. It is, even, sometimes sufficient to be written a single sentence. The background, as the word itself indicates, is aimed at providing the readers with a background to the study, and hence to smoothly lead into a description of the methods employed in the investigation. If the abstract contains a lengthy background section, there will be less space remains for the presentation of the results. This is unfortunate because the reader is interested in the paper because of its findings, and not because of its background.

The second part of an abstract is methods, the second-longest section in the abstract. It should contain sufficient information to enable the readers to understand what was done, and how. This should be written carefully in order to miss any single important issue such as the research design, sampling, subject selection, data collection methods, data analysis.

The results section is the most important part of the abstract and nothing should compromise its range and quality. This is because readers who peruse an abstract do so to learn about the findings of the study. The results section should therefore be the longest part of the abstract and should contain as much detail about the findings as the journal word count permits.

Abstract is built by answering the following questions with one or two sentences for each one (Belt et.al, 2011):

a. What is the bigger, more general fields the article relates to?

b. What is the purpose of the article?

c. What methodology is employed?
d. What are the key results?

e. What are the practical implications of the research result?

Introduction

Introduction section of a journal article is not strictly limited in number of words, unlike the abstract. Still, it should be as concise as possible. It can be a tricky part of the paper to write, so many scientists and researchers prefer to write it last, ensuring that they miss no major points.

The introduction works upon the principle of introducing the topic of the paper and organizing it into a broad context, and gradually narrowing down to a research problem, thesis and hypothesis. A good introduction explains the underlying reason of doing a research- showing the gap between the real fact and the ideal demand so that it is worthy to solve the research problem, and creating ‘leads’ to make the readers want to delve further into the work.

Introduction of a paper, therefore, consists of background, importance, limitation, and assumption (Shuttleworth, 2014). Background is the first task of the introduction intended to set the scene, give the paper a context and see how it fits in with previous research in the field. The first paragraph of this section is organized based around the historical narrative from the very first research in the field to the current day. This leads to the rationale behind the research revealing whether it is building upon previous research, looking at something that everybody else has overlooked, or improving upon a previous research project that delivered unclear results. The importance of this section is to flow into how to fill the gap, to lay out the research objectives and methodology, and to predict what impact the research will have if everything works as it should. This section highlights the weaknesses and the limitation of the research and points out any assumptions about conditions during the research and set out your basic principles before embarking upon the research. There are a few helpful tips to write a strong introduction, arouse interest and encourage the reader to read the rest of the paper: Keep it Short, Define
the Problem, and Organization. The entire introduction should logically end at the research question and thesis statement or hypothesis, and by the end of the introduction, the readers should know exactly what the writers are trying to achieve with the paper. Once your introduction is complete, think about attacking the rest of the paper.

Theory/ Literature Review

Theory/Literature Review is a part of a journal article, according to Belt et.al. (2011) which is started by findings a few good articles from journal or good books relevant to the topic discussed. Those are later on used as the underlying basis of developing literature review. Write the summary of the few pages based on those articles and books. It can be noted that it is not customary to describe the development of the writer’s understanding in an article, but to describe what others have studied which is relevant to the present topic. The aim of reviewing literature is not to review all possible references, but to concentrate on those relevant to the focus topic of the present study. Reviewing literature is intended to position of the present study in relation of the previous literature; therefore, just cite the articles on which the present research is based. When finding out the references, it is aimed at understanding what the true meanings of the articles are. It is essential to refer to new journal articles to ensure the timeliness of the present articles. Then finalize the theory only after writing up the results of the present research.

Research Method/Process

Research Method/Process section of an article should be clearly discussed in order that the other researchers can repeat the study. The researcher should prove that the research method employed is robust and applicable in the field of the present study. The important thing of this section is to clearly describe how the present research is conducted, even if it is necessary, the research process can be visualized by using graphic, chart, table, and figure. The process of developing the instrument of research
(instrumentation) should also be deliberately discussed, so that the validity and the reliability of the instrument are scientifically tested. This is the important part of a research, because the validity and reliability of instruments determine those of data collected. If the data collected are valid and reliable, the conclusion drawn is able to be scientifically approved. Therefore, the reliability and validity of the research is discussed in this section.

**Result and Discussion**

Result and Discussion part of a journal article is to write up and summarize the results as well as the analysis of the research. This section focuses more on the actual analysis of the materials, not documenting the data obtained. While analyzing the results, think of the focus of the article will be, but it is not necessary fix the focus too early. Yet, be flexible and open-minded and let the main points of the research result act as a helpful means of defining the article focus. Just present the results of the present study in a logical order which is easy for an outsider to understand. It can be started from more general points to the narrow ones. To compare and contrast to the results of the related previous studies is helpful to build a new scientific conclusion of a certain body of knowledge so that it gives clear and applicable contribution to the related field of study. It is clearer to present the key results of the research by using some visual media such as figure, chart, lists, and table. In addition, include the discussion section at the end of the results to explain and contemplate the results. The important thing to be noticed is that let the readers distinguish between the research facts and the researcher’s opinion.

**Conclusion**

Conclusion section of a journal article, alongside with the abstract and introduction is one of the core elements of a journal article. The readers will directly reading this section after taking a look at the abstract in order to get the main points of the research results. This section tells shortly about the
importance of doing the present research, shows the results of the research,
and discusses either practical or theoretical significance of the research
results. Take for example the result of research in education should have
pedagogical implication theoretically or practically. Moreover, limitation of
the present study should also be explained and made as the basis to formulate
suggestions and recommendation for the following researchers.

In short, conclusion part of a journal article can be organized into
the following order: Introduction; Results which might discuss at least one
paragraph for each research question. Still, they are able to be organized in a
more compact structure; Significance of the research and implication (in the
field of instruction for example); Limitation of the research; Recommended
topics for the following researchers.

Such a structure is useful to make it easier for readers to follow the
researcher’ thinking and enable understanding the main content of the article
without reading the whole article. It is also important to include practical
implication of the research in the conclusion section. Remember that the
conclusion section should be relevant with the previous sections.

Reference

Reference is a list of sources used in journal articles. As stated by Meyer
(2008) that clearly, reference citations are critical, enabling measurability
and discoverability. Accurate references and reference linking influence
the quality of a journal. Thomson Scientific’s Impact Factor, developed in
the 1960s, was the original measure of citation analysis to evaluate journal
quality. Many journals have their own reference styles. Some use numbered
styles; some use alphabetical references. Some are based on standard
reference styles, such as the AMA Manual of Style or the Publication Manual
of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Here is a guide of citing references which is acceptable for journal
articles, namely APA citation styles. The following are the examples of how
to cite either in text or in reference section of an article.
2. Book with two authors

If they are written in-Text..... (Howitt & Cramer, 2008)

In list of reference, it will be written:


3. Book with Editor as Author

If it is written in-Text: ..... (Gallery, 2004)

In list of reference, it will be written:


4. Brochure or Pamphlet

If it is written in-Text: ..... (New York, 2002)

In list of reference, it will be written:


5. An anonymous book

If they are written in-Text: ..... (Environmental resource handbook, 2001).

There is written in reference list as follow:


6. Journal article with continuous paging

If they are written in-Text: ...... (Chauhan & Lal, 2012)

There is written in reference list as follow:

7. Website

a. If they are written in-Text: ..... (United State Environmental, 2007)
   In list of reference, it will be written:

b. If they are written in-Text..... (Gelspan, 2007)
   There is written in reference list as follow:

8. Multiple citations in the same parentheses
   When entering more than one in-text citation within the same parentheses enter them in the same order as in the reference list.

   If they are written in-Text (Anderson & Reid, 2009; Howitt & Cramer, 2008). Then they are written in reference list as follow:


9. Citing a reference someone else has cited
   If you need to refer to a work that has been cited in a paper you have read but which you have not read yourself then the cited work is only referred to as part of the in-text citation. The reference list entry is for the paper you have read.

   In-Text
   O’Reilly (as cited in Byrne, 2008) argues that...

10. Reference List
Citing a newspaper article in print
:When creating you newspaper citation, keep in mind

Precede page numbers for newspaper articles with p. (for a single
page) or pp. (for multiple pages).

If an article appears on discontinuous pages, give all page numbers,
and separate the numbers with a comma (e.g., pp. B1, B3, B5-B7). Look at
the example below:

In Text, it is written:.............(Rosenberg, 1997)
In reference list, it is written:

11. Citing a newspaper article found online

When citing a newspaper in APA, keep in mind:

APA does NOT require you to include the date of access for electronic
sources. If you discovered a newspaper article via an online database, that
information is NOT required for the citation either.

Multiple lines: If the URL runs onto a second line, only break URL
before punctuations (except for http://).

In Text, it is written:.............(Rosenberg, 1997)
In reference list, it is written:
nytimes.com

12. Citing a general website article without an author

When citing website article without author, the APA format structure
is as follow: Article title. (Year, Month Date of Publication). Retrieved from
URL

Look at the example below:

Teen posed as doctor at West Palm Beach hospital: police. (2015,
Posed-as-Doctor-at-West-Palm-Beach-Hospital-Police-288810831.html
CONCLUSION

To sum up, there is a three-folded-point of publishing the EFL students’ results of research or projects which is either assigned by their lecturers or done individually. The first is that it significant for EFL students to set a belief that writing is not anymore an intimidating and frustrating activity to do by building appropriate understanding on the skills of writing. The second is to let their valuable works accessible by other people is also worthy, so that readers can make use of the results of the EFL students’ works. In addition, to publish their works in a journal is important to contribute to the advancement of science and knowledge. Finally, in order that the EFL students are able to publish their manuscripts in journals, this review article also offers applicable tips to write a scientific paper feasible to be published in a reputable journal.
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