



COMMON MISTAKES IN THE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING: RETHINKING FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Rusdiana Junaid

Universitas Cokroaminoto Palopo, South Sulawesi, Indonesia
Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan

Rustan Santaria

Institute Agama Islam Negeri Palopo, South Sulawesi, Indonesia
Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan

Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 1st January 2022 Accepted: 1st February 2022 Published: 4th March 2022</p>	<p>This study is an attempt to provide an overview of the common mistakes found in the students' academic writing, particularly in their theses as a compulsory subject for them to accomplish before getting their undergraduate degree at Universitas Cokroaminoto Palopo (UNCP). In the first section, the concept and criteria of a good academic writing as well as the guidelines for theses writing are described. The next section is data presentation collected from the students' theses at UNCP which were written from 2014 – 2017 followed by discussion of the results. The result reveals that the students' mistakes in academic writing are classified into two broad categories, namely mechanical inaccuracies and content mistakes. Mechanical inaccuracies to include: lay out, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and font size. Content mistakes cover grammatical mistakes, word choice, argumentation, and discussion. Grammatical mistakes include subject-verb agreement, plural – singulars, double verbs, missing verbs, missing nouns, pronouns, and articles usage. The results of the research can be used as a basis for developing curriculum at the English Language Education Study Program in higher education in general and at UNCP in particular.</p>

Keywords Common mistakes, thesis, curriculum development

INTRODUCTION

Similar with other undergraduate students in Indonesian universities, students at Universitas Cokroaminoto Palopo (UNCP) are required to write a research based thesis as a compulsory subject before getting their undergraduate degree. Thesis [*skripsi*, in Bahasa Indonesia in the case of this study], as one of academic writings refers to the written report of an independent major research project by graduate candidates as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for attaining their qualification. In writing their theses, students at UNCP are supervised by two supervisors whose areas of expertise are relevant with the students' research topics. These two supervisors focus on different aspects of the theses. First supervisor focuses on the content aspects of the theses whereas second supervisor focuses on mechanical aspects of the theses. However, this liability division is not always rigid.

Writing, according to Rudiyanto (2017) has been a difficult skill for EFL learners. It requires a number of steps which demonstrates the complexity of writing nature. It takes appropriate structures, content, mechanics, and organizations to accomplish good writing and not many EFL writers understand and master them well (Quvanch & Si Na, 2022). Writing is a complex task to accomplish. As stated by Ramasamy and Aziz (2018) that the complexity of writing lies in its various complicated roles such as the arrangement and expansion of ideas, proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuations, and spellings. It requires someone to organize ideas and apply suitable vocabularies, grammar, and sentence structures.

In relation to academic writing, according to (Fernsten & Reda, 2011), is a process that can involve struggle and conflict for many, especially when genres and/or discourses are new. Broadly speaking, this is true for the students at UNCP. Despite being supervised by two apt supervisors, the majority of the students still find it difficult and struggle to write and produce virtuous theses. Consequently, writing a thesis has always been considered a daunting task to perform in their academic lives, particularly for the students of English Language Education Study Program since they are required to write their theses in English. It is plausible since writing a thesis as many students believe is a very demanding and intricate activity that requires many skills. This statement is supported by (Munoz-luna, 2015), who claims that writing is one of the most complex activities necessary for human literacy development. Therefore, it involves a series of actions related to curriculum and schools instruction. Furthermore, Alameddin and Mirza (2016) stated that writing is one of the most complex activities involving grammar and semantic instruction. Academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analysing ideas (Chad, 2014).

The concept and criteria of a good thesis in this study are mainly based on two standards, namely UNCP guidelines for theses writing and universal framework for theses writing. In addition to these two standards, criteria of a good writing in general generated from other reliable sources are also taken into consideration. UNCP guidelines for theses writing provide students with information on issues related to the content, the structure or general outline and organizational as well as mechanical aspects of the thesis. Information on what language to use, lay out, numbering page, line spacing, margin, font size, and referencing are also included. There are no significant differences between UNCP theses writing guidelines and the universal theses writing guidelines. One of the differences identified was in UNCP theses writing guidelines, there is no number of word limit clearly stated while in general framework, it is clearly stated the limitation of words of a thesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

UNCP thesis consists of five chapters preceded by preliminary essential information as can be seen in Table 1.
Table1. General Framework of UNCP Thesis

TITLE PAGE

APPROVAL

ABSTRACT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Components of chapter 3 depend on the characteristics of each faculty.

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5.1 Conclusion

5.2 Suggestion

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As a comparison, universal framework of a thesis can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Universal Framework for theses

Preliminary pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Title page Committee page Dedication page Acknowledgment Abstract Table of contents List of Tables, Figures, abbreviations, etc.
Chapter 1: Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General background information on the study Purpose and significance of the research Research questions and hypothesis Definition of key terms
Chapter 2: Review of the literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General review of relevant literature and report on theoretical frameworks relevant to the problem Report on previous research relevant to the problem (major findings, how they were obtained and what can be learned from them) Critique of previous research studies (problems in design, instrumentations and analysis techniques as well as their contribution to the literature) Statement of the gap in the literature and the rationale for the study
Chapter 3: Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research design Participants Research instruments Procedures
Chapter 4: Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statistical techniques for data analysis Findings of the research
Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A re-statement of the research problem A re-statement of the results Discussion and interpretation of the findings in relation to previous research on the topic Limitations Implications Suggestions for further research
References / Bibliography Appendices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive list of all sources Questionnaires, tests, etc.

(Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015)

Hyland in his book *Disciplinary discourse: Social interaction in academic writing* as cited in Academic Coaching and Writing proposes 10 characteristics of a good academic writing, no matter the discipline is. They are: 1) starting with good ideas, 2) having a clear sense of audience, genre, and purpose, 3) approaching the 'so what' question, 4) using a logical progression of ideas, 5) using sources judiciously, 6) writing clearly and directly, 7) writing specific and detail-oriented prose, 8) using a consistent tone and style, 9) writing with a compelling strong voice, and 10) making sure the writing is mechanically competent. Of the ten aforementioned criteria, criteria number 1, 4, 5, 6, and 10 are closely related to the present study and therefore they are used as additional bases for the data analysis.

Akin to the view of characteristics of a good writing stated above, (Whitaker, 2009) suggests 10 principles of academic writing. They are clear purpose, audience engagement, clear point of view, single focus, logical organization, strong support, clear and complete explanation, effective use of research, correct APA style, and writing style. In relation to the present study, logical organization (how to use appropriate connected words), effective use of research (how to cite other author's work), and writing style (mechanical aspects of writing) are taken into consideration in discussing of the results of the study. In addition to the characteristics of a good academic writing proposed above, other grammar books (Practical English Usage by (Swan, 2002), Basic English Grammar (2006) and Fundamental English Grammar (1992) by Azar are also used as criteria for checking language problems related to grammar and syntax.

To obtain the intended data, this study is driven by the following research question: "What are the common mistakes found in the students' theses?" To answer this question, the researchers read the randomly selected chapters of the students' theses thoroughly, and analyzed the data qualitatively and quantitatively.

METHODS

To address the research question, qualitative and quantitative methods are employed. It was qualitative seeing that the findings were described in a narrative description. In other words, data of the research were presented in a descriptive form. In addition, the data collected were analyzed quantitatively of some sort. In this case, the data were compiled in a table numerically. It is intended to display the range number of words and number of paragraphs of the students' theses in each year. Examples of mistakes in each type are displayed and described.

DATA SOURCE

The corpus of the present study comprised 20 exemplars randomly selected undergraduate students' unpublished theses of English language education study program. The corpus covers four years of graduation time from 2014 to 2017. Of the five chapters of the theses, three chapters became the focus of the current study, namely chapter 1, the introduction; chapter 3, the research methods; and chapter 4 the findings and discussions. The rationale behind the selection of those three chapters was that they were assumed to be the chapters where students put their own ideas and arguments most.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Five exemplars each year of the theses written in 2014 – 2017 as the corpus of the study were selected randomly. After the selection, the researchers copied chapters 1,3, and 4 of each thesis for the ease of identification and codification purposes. The contents of the selected chapters were read thoroughly in order to identify the mistakes both the contents and mechanical aspects for later analysis. All the identified mistakes were underlined and codified for classification. The outcomes of the classification were put into tables. Based on those identification, codification, and classifications, the researchers were able to draw conclusions about common mistakes found in the students theses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Classification and description of the selected chapters of UNCP students' theses in relation to the range number of words and the number of paragraphs in each year are displayed in Tables 3, Table 4, and Table 5.

Table 3. Description of the students' theses introduction section corpus

Year	Number of theses	Number of paragraphs	Number of words
2014	5	24	2,110
2015	5	26	2,212
2016	5	22	2,019
2017	5	19	1,998
Total	20	91	8,339

The total number of theses is 20 exemplars selected randomly 5 each year. Table 3 illustrates that the total number of words is approximately 8,339 in 91 paragraphs. The lengths of the paragraphs varied as there is no rule stated in the theses guidelines related to the word limit to include in the instruction section.

Table 4. Description of the students' theses research method section corpus

Year	Number of theses	Number of paragraphs	Number of words
2014	5	36	3,065
2015	5	39	3,190
2016	5	32	2,866
2017	5	31	2,645
Total	20	138	11,766

Table 4 illustrates the corpus of research method section with estimation of the total number of words in 138 paragraphs is 11,766. The number of paragraphs is varied among the theses; mostly depend on the types of the research. The treatments applied in the experimental and or pre-experimental research usually need comprehensive explanation and therefore requires more paragraphs compare to the descriptive ones.

Table 5. Description of the students' theses findings and discussion section corpus

Year	Number of theses	Number of paragraphs	Number of words
2014	5	28	3,315
2015	5	31	3,608
2016	5	27	3,222
2017	5	13	2,968
Total	20	99	13,113

Table 5 figures out the total number of estimated words in 99 paragraphs written in the findings and discussion section, that is approximately 13,113 words.

The mistakes found in the students' theses can be classified into two broad categories, namely content aspects mistakes and mechanical inaccuracies. The total number of occurrences of each type is displayed in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 7. Occurrences of each type of content mistakes per year

Category	Sub-category	Year			
		2014	2015	2016	2017
Grammar	Subject-Verb Agreement	34	31	26	21
	Singular – Plural	41	37	22	25
	Double Verbs	17	23	16	19
	Missing Verbs	26	22	19	16
	Missing Noun	15	13	18	12
	Pronouns	27	23	27	21
	Articles	59	51	47	37
Word Choice		13	9	11	19
Argumentation		17	14	9	5
Discussion		4	4	3	4

Referring to Table 7, grammatical mistakes were identified to have 7 sub categories in which occurrences of each type are various from year to year. Data shows that mistakes regarding subject – verb agreement decrease slightly from year to year. Of the 7 sub categories of grammatical mistakes, articles is the most commonly occur in all years followed by singular – plural, subject-verb agreement, and pronouns respectively. Some examples of grammatical sub-categories types of mistakes are presented and described.

1. Subject – verbs agreement
 - a. The *researcher give* treatment 6 times.
 - b. Those *students has* some problems.
2. Singular – plural
 - a. The teacher should have some *strategy* to overcome the problem.
 - b. We need to know the character of *each students*.
3. Double verb
 - a. *According to* Harmer (2008) *said* that ...
 - b. *According to* Ali (2011) *argues* that ...
4. Missing verbs
 - a. The instrument that *will in this* research is writing test.
 - b. Harmer (1991) media as a channel ...
5. Missing nouns
 - a. Time *and of* the research will be ...
 - b. If you understand to *describe that* means
6. Pronouns
 - a. By reading, the reader will get something to improve *they* knowledge,
 - b. We cannot understand *him* explanation.

Box 1. Writing Sample 1

Reading is one of the important componensts in every language. ^BBy reading the reader will get something to improve ^{they} knowledge, information and pleasure,

7. Articles
 - a. English plays important role in education sector.
 - b. Writing is important skill which needs ...

Not only grammatical mistakes in content category occur but also word choice, argumentation, and content of discussion section.

Examples of word-choice:

1. The step started by giving *explained* about listening.
2. The researcher *divided* the questionnaire.

The first example indicates that some students are not able to use appropriate words even though they have studied parts of speech at the first year. They should have used noun instead of verb in that case. For the second example, most likely the student lack of synonym repertoire or she/he simply translate word for word from Indonesia into English. In bahasa Indonesia, *membagi* is *divide*. Therefore some Indonesian students wrote *divided* instead of *distributed*.

For the argumentation, there are few students who wrote illogical argument at the background section. For example if they wrote "Reading ability of the second year students of SMPN 7 Palopo is low" when they want to conduct research on "The ability of the second year students of SMPN 7 Palopo." It is not logic because they have already known that reading ability of the second year students of SMPN 7 Palopo is low and yet they want to conduct research on it. Another example is if they want to conduct research on the effectiveness of a particular teaching method or teaching strategy when they already have known that those particular teaching methods or learning strategies are effective.

In relation to discussion section, the majority of the students did not discuss the results of their research but re-wrote their findings. They did not give examples or they still find it hard to relate their research findings with the related theories or previous research findings.

Table 8. Occurrences of each type of mechanical inaccuracies per year

Category	Year			
	2014	2015	2016	2017
Lay out (margin, numbering)	35	31	26	22
Capitalization	87	63	73	35
Punctuation	66	52	58	41
Spelling	42	37	40	31
Font Size	22	18	25	15

Of the 5 categories in mechanical inaccuracies, capitalization is the most commonly occur followed by punctuation, spelling, lay out, and font size respectively. Each of these categories will be given examples followed by simple explanations.

1. Lay out

Referring to the theses of UNCP students, particularly English language education study program, some students did not follow the lay out as suggested in the guidelines. For example, in setting the margin and numbering sections, some students did them in different ways.

2. Capitalization

- a. This research was conducted at SMPN 8 *palopo*.
- b. Teach *Students* how to learn new words.

Related to capitalization, there were some students did no pay attention to the rules of academic writing. For example, some students used capital letter in a word in the middle of the sentence even though that word was not required capital letter as shown in example 2.b. On the other hand, some words which required capital letter, they wrote them in small letter, for instance name of a city (palopo) as can be seen in example number 2.a.

3. Punctuation

- a. It is necessary to make limitation of the problem on how the process of *teaching* .
- b. In this *research* ,*the* researcher will use random sampling technique.

Punctuation is one of the common inaccuracies found in the students of UNCP theses. For example, few students did not put full stop at the end of a sentence. Another example, they put space before *comma*, or *full stop*. It is not known yet the factors, whether it is a careless or a lack of knowledge.

4. Spelling

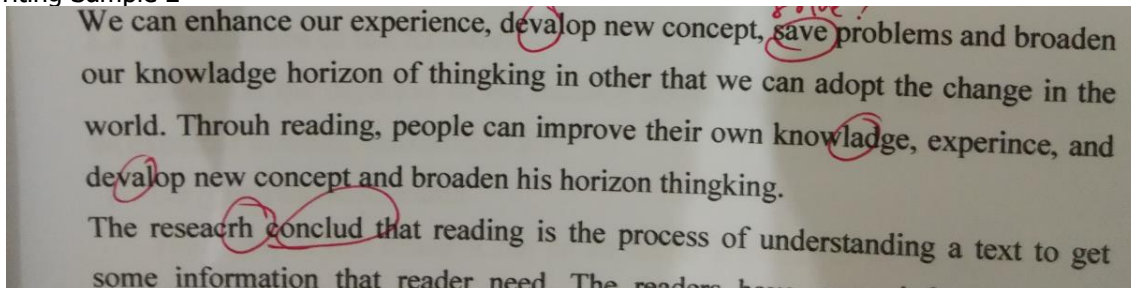
- a. On the other hand, in scientific *defenition*, media can be ...
- b. *Throuh* reading, people can improve their *knowladge*, experience, and *devalop* ...

In punctuation case, some students. Spelling is another common inaccuracy which is always occurs in the students' academic writing (theses). There are some students who are fluent in speaking but clearly less competent in spelling. This can be seen from their writing. In relation to this, students are suggested to activate and make use of grammar and spelling checker before submitting their theses draft.

5. Font size

Related to font size, there were few students who did not follow the rules. For example the size of the title should be in 14 Times New Roman, but they wrote them in 16 Calibri.

Box 2. Writing Sample 2



Writing sample in box 2 is a sample in a background taken from one of the students' thesis which shows some mistakes or inaccuracies in terms of spelling and word choice. Spelling mistakes are 'devalop' should be 'develop',

'Throuh' should be 'through,' 'knowladge' should be 'knowledge,' 'thingking' should be 'thinking,' 'conclud' should be 'conclude'. Word choice inaccuracies are *save problems* which should be *solve problems* and *research* which should be *researcher*.

The findings reveal that there are many mistakes and inaccuracies occur in the students' theses both related to the contents and mechanical aspects as well as language problems albeit the students are supervised by two professional competent supervisors. The supervisors always encourage their students to be creative and put extra work for writing their theses. Preceded to writing their theses, the students are advised to program subjects that support their ability to undertake research and write a research report such as research methods, vocabulary, functional grammar, and translation.

The writers argue that there are some constraints faces by the students to produce good theses writing even though they have programmed those supporting subjects. Among others are structure and rules discrepancies between English and Bahasa Indonesia and inaccurate transferring meaning from Indonesian into English. In addition, the researchers believe that many students do not make use of grammar and spelling checker facilities and they do not proof read their theses draft before submitting them.

Encouraging students to be creative and organized is not enough as Battala and Vera in (Robertson, 2019) state that although some of the strategies teachers use encourage their students to be creative and organized, that is not enough. Students must take into account many aspects at the time of writing such as: vocabulary, mechanics, grammar, organization and content and not only one of these items because to create adequate compositions students must take into account every single detail.

Possessing vocabulary repertoire and mastering grammar play a very significant role in writing. Possessing vocabulary repertoire makes the writer easy to choose appropriate words for a particular context. Using correct grammar makes the sentences make sense and helps the writer to express his/her ideas clearly. This statement is relevant with Deveci's (2019) view that the correct use of grammar plays a key role in communicating our ideas, beliefs, thoughts and feelings to others.

One strategy to improve the quality of the students' theses writing is proofreading them by other students and the writers themselves should read their writings several times. (Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015) argue that students need to spend more time on proofreading and polishing the final versions of their theses before the submission as this will be kept as a record of their intellectuality. Students may tackle this issue by asking peers and colleagues to read their theses once more. At this stage, the need for a departmental proof-reader, preferably a native one, is felt to be necessary. Besides, supervisors and examiners should also highlight all problem types in viva sessions for all students. Additionally, more course-work and practice on thesis writing with a focus on writing styles is needed for students.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has identified common mistakes in undergraduate unpublished theses at Universitas Cokroaminoto Palopo. The findings reveal that common mistakes found in the students' theses can be classified into two broad categories, namely content mistakes and mechanical inaccuracies. Content mistakes cover grammatical mistakes, word choice, argumentation, and discussion. Grammatical mistakes include subject-verb agreement, plural – singular, double verbs, missing verbs, missing nouns, pronouns, and articles usage. Mechanical inaccuracies cover punctuation, capitalization, spelling, lay out, and font size. The results of the research can be used as a basis for developing curriculum at the English Language Education Study Program in higher education in general and at UNCP in particular.

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