

Strengthening the Outlining Process to Improve EFL Students' Academic Writing Competence

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Abstract: To produce a good piece of writing, learners are suggested to follow a pre-writing stage, one of which is outlining. It is believed that by writing an outline, a student can improve their writing quality since the ideas will be organized and they can focus on a certain topics more clearly. In terms of academic writing, the organization of the composition must be strictly followed and clearly observed (Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, & Solomon, 2014; Zemach & Ghulldu, 2011). This study aims to find the extent to which an outlining stage improves students' quality of writing. This qualitative study involved 20 English Department students' essays are assessed through their pre-writing activity (outlining stage) and writing activity. In the outlining stage, and their outline is checked and revised twice before they finally compose an essay. Then, their outlines and essays are compared specifically based on the organization of the essay, i.e. introduction, body and conclusion, and the unity as well. The comparison is also done to see whether their essays consistently follow the outlines. The results show that to a certain extent students improve significantly in writing essays after developing outlines. It is also found that teachers feedback and time allocation to develop outlines are quite crucial.

1 INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is generally one compulsory subject for college students who learn English as their second or foreign language (possibly other languages as well). The course is aimed at facilitating students to be able to produce academic essays, whose rules are quite different from other kinds of writing – creative writing for example. Moreover, to some extent they are required to have an ability to “write high quality papers for their academic coursework.” (Zúñiga & Macías, 2006)

According to a number of authors of essay writing textbooks (Folse et al., 2014; Zemach & Ghulldu, 2011), there are some strategies that should be followed to produce a good essay. The strategies generally can be divided into three stages: prewriting, writing, and reviewing and revising. Thus, prewriting is considered one important stage in essay writing. They believe that by following such strategies, learners can produce an essay in a better quality (compared to those who do not follow the strategy). This is confirmed by Munoz-luna (2015) whose some of her respondents always use a pre-writing strategy which includes planning, outlining and proof-

reading. She points out that for producing a composition of any academic text, the strategy and planning is believed to be an important stage. Likewise, Abdollahzade and Taak (2014) suggest that learners can perform better in expository writing task for they spend a certain amount of time before producing the essay. This strategy has facilitated the learners to be more engaged in the task. The result of their findings also suggests that “a more coherent and organized text with a richer range of vocabulary” has been produced.

Even though a number of studies on prewriting activity have been conducted, the effects of this activity toward L2 writing have not been examined much. (Joaquin, Kim, & Shin, 2013) They have found that learners who apply prewriting strategies generally perform better than those who do not do it. However, this is not applied to a particular strategy since outlining and listing are not the most effective strategy. They further propose that allocating more time in prewriting stage does facilitate the producing of a better essay.

Furthermore, Andrew (2016) compares the attitude of L2 learners toward traditional outlining and the use of multimodal in outlining. The learners

view positively toward the outlining activity as it is considered useful to develop content and organize information in their writing. Other findings also encourage teachers to provide more time in the stage of prewriting, including outlining. (Andrew, 2016; Zúñiga & Macías, 2006)

This paper explores how the prewriting stage – specifically outlining – influences L2 learners in producing better academic essays. It also investigated how far the students can apply unity in their writing.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Zemach & Ghulldu (2011) pre-writing stage is when students plan what they will write. This stage includes choosing a topic, gathering ideas, and organizing ideas. Outlining can be classified into the final step, which is organizing ideas. Joaquin, Kim, & Shin (2013) suggest that an outline is “an organized list of main ideas, in which subordination occurs representing supporting examples or ideas that the writer may intend to follow for the final product.” The outline should follow a certain structure of organization which is developed similar according to a number of authors. (Folse et al., 2014; Oshima & Hague, 2014; Zemach & Ghulldu, 2011) It consists of:

- Introductory paragraph: in which the thesis statement is presented. By stating the thesis clearly, the writers can show the specific topics and controlling ideas they want to discuss.
- Body paragraphs (the number of paragraphs may vary): the development of the topics stated in the introductory paragraph.
- Concluding paragraph: the restatement of the thesis, summary or review of the main points discussed in the body. It can also present the writer’s concluding remarks about the topic.

These three parts are basic and important parts of an essay. All ideas among paragraphs must be well connected to the thesis statement, and the supporting ideas in a body paragraph. This is called “unity”. (Zemach & Ghulldu, 2011)

3 METHODS

This is action research which has recorded the activities in an Academic Writing class. The participants were 20 second semester students majoring in English. The stages applied in this course included prewriting, writing, and post-writing

activities. However, due to the limited time and energy, the study focuses only on the prewriting – specifically outlining – and writing activities.

There were several steps taken. First, the teacher provided explanation about how to write in an academic context, including the organization of the essay and the use of proper vocabulary in academic context. Then the students were asked to brainstorm a certain topic which was provided by the teacher. In this stage, the students could freely write what they knew about the topic. Afterwards, they were asked to write the first draft of the outline. In this activity, they must follow the organization of academic essays: introduction, body, and conclusion. The writing of the thesis statement was considered highly important in the introduction part since it comprised the whole idea of the essay. The writing of the thesis statement was evaluated based on the topics and controlling ideas.

Next the teacher checked the first draft of the outline to see whether the students follow the organization of the essay. In this stage, the teacher provided feedback for the students to revise their first outline. Then when the outlines were confirmed correct, the students could write their first draft of the essay. In this stage, the essay were mainly assessed based on the organization, whether it followed the outline. Thus, the outline and the essay were compared whether they were in line or not. The unity among paragraphs is also assessed to find whether the ideas in the paragraphs are well developed.

4 RESULTS

The discussion in this section mainly deals with whether the students accurately wrote their outlines and essays. The topic that the teacher provided was “traditional market vs modern market in your neighborhood.”

The following is the summary of first outlining activity in terms of the number of students.

Table 1: Summary results of first outlining.

Accurate thesis statement	Thesis statement needs revision	Accurate outline (follow the organization)	Less or not accurate (not follow the organization; need revision)
1	19	1	19

In the first activity, after the teacher provided some explanation about academic writing, the students were asked to brainstorm about a certain

topic provided. Then they were asked to write the first draft of the outlines. The writing of the thesis statement is highly concerned in this activity. The results indicate that only one student wrote an accurate thesis, which means that this student was able to present the topic and controlling ideas clearly. Her outline was also accurate. Thus, there were 19 students who had to revise their thesis and outlines. For these students, the teacher provided feedback dealing with thesis statement, organization, and how to develop unity among paragraphs. Thus, the next activity was revising the first draft of the outlines.

This table shows the summary result from the second outlining.

Table 2: Summary results of second outlining.

Accurate thesis statement	thesis statement needs revision	Accurate outline (follow the organization)	Less or not accurate (not follow the organization; need revision)
8	12	14	6

After revising the first draft of the outline, several students showed improvement in writing the thesis and outlines. It could be clearly seen that 13 students improved in writing their outlines. However, there were only 7 students who did better in writing the thesis statement. It means that there were 6 students who had more accurate outlines but their thesis statement needed to be revised in some ways. Their thesis was not yet accurate due to one of these factors: the sentence structure was not correct; the topics and controlling ideas were not clear. Therefore, they must revise their thesis statement and outlines once again. Certainly the teacher still provided feedback for the students.

Table 3 shows the summary result of the third outlining.

Table 3: Summary results of third outlining

Accurate thesis statement	thesis statement needs revision	Accurate outline (follow the organization)	Less or not accurate (not follow the organization; need revision)
18	2	18	2

As it can be indicated by the table above that improvement was made by 10 students in terms of thesis statement writing, and 4 students in terms of accurate outline. In other words, 2 students still needed guidance to write the thesis statement and outline more accurately. However, after experiencing

3 stages for outlining, all students could continue to write the first draft of the essay. They must develop their outlines into an essay with a certain organization and unified ideas.

The following table summarizes the result of first draft of essay writing.

Table 4: Summary result of first essay drafting.

Accurate essay organization	Less accurate essay organization	Accurate unity	Less accurate unity
16	4	13	7

After revising the outlines twice and acquiring more accurate ones, the students were assigned to write the first draft of the essay. Table 4 shows that in terms of organization, 16 students wrote the essay accurately while 4 of them wrote less accurately. In other words, there were 16 students who had written the essay which was in line with the outlines they produced. The body paragraphs showed development of the thesis statement and the conclusion either restated or summarized all discussions. However, 4 students were not able to write the essay accurately since the body paragraphs were not developed quite well. In addition, there were 13 students who had applied unity accurately and 7 of them applied it less accurately. Thus, there were 3 students who had written the essay accurately (in terms of organization) but the unity was not quite well developed. It means that there were a few ideas which were unrelated one another. For these cases, the teacher provided feedback for them to revise their first draft of essays.

Table 5: Summary result of second essay drafting.

Accurate essay organization	Less accurate essay organization	Accurate unity	Less accurate unity
19	1	19	1

The second drafting of essays showed much improvement. 3 students had revised their essay and the organization was much better. It means they were able to develop the ideas in the body paragraphs in line with the thesis statement. In addition, 6 students improved by being able to apply unity in their essay; It was much better developed.

5 CONCLUSION

The study generally shows that outlining process as well as teacher's feedback are crucial to produce a

better academic essay. The students have shown improvement from the first step of writing outlines until producing the essay. Indeed students and teachers should provide much more time in the outlining stage. Teachers must guide their students step by step, especially when providing feedback for them to acquire what the course requires. By writing an outline before drafting, students will have a structure in their mind about what to write and what ideas to be developed.

6 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is limited to discussing the process of outlining and essay drafting in terms of organization and unity. It does not specifically include grammatical mistakes. Therefore, further research may explore more about the grammatical aspects involved in the writing.

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