

Thesis and Research Writing In English By Indonesian Higher Degree Students Studying Overseas

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Abstract: Indonesian Research Degree Students studying overseas in Australian Universities, ie. those undertaking a PhD, EdD, or Master Degree by Coursework and Minor Thesis, have exactly the same problems in thesis writing as local Australian students. They may have minor problems of language in writing in English as a result of transfer from Bahasa Indonesia. But the major problems of all first time research degree students is learning how to become researchers and how to present their research in a discourse format as a thesis or dissertation that has become the asseped norm internationally. This paper firstly examines some of the common surface written language problems of Indonesian Higher Degree Students. This data is drawn from an analysis of actual drafts of these written over the last ten years by a range of Indonesian students. Secondly, the paper discusses the nature of developing as a researcher and the associated problems of how this influences the presentation of research. And thirdly, the paper reflects on ways in which the process of learning to think and write as a researcher can be facilitated.

Keywords: Thesis writers, surface language errors, Asian writers, class and category.

I want to stress at the very outset of this paper that Indonesian Higher Degree Students from local Australian or other English native speaking backgrounds. The assumption that Asian students in general and Indonesian students in particular have very different or special problems is not true in my experience over ten years as a supervisor of Higher Degrees. The research and thesis writing problems are largely the same as a supervisor of Higher Degrees. There may be some surface grammar problems and that is an issue I will deal with later in the paper. But the

general problems of conceptualising a research question, explaining clearly theoretical foundations underpinning the research question and designing, implementing and writing up a research project in the form of a thesis depends much on a student's previous experience of this process no matter what background they come from. These experiences need to have included practice in extended writing and independent thinking. The ideas in a thesis are arrived at through a process of individual research and argument and not through a process of consensus in face to face discussion with others. This process of individual argumentation is a lonely and frustrating one for most students who are accustomed to the support of their peers.

A thesis at a university aims at establishing some new knowledge about a subject. The word thesis means basically an argument. And at the level of the PhD it is expected that the argument the study is making in their thesis will make an original contribution to knowledge howefer small and prove that the candidate is capable of doing independent research., i.e. in many respects it is a licence to do research, or passing is a statement that the students has the capability to do research that is worthwhile and can be accepted as valid. The validity of this knowledge or truth like all so called truth is in some sense relative and bound up with what and how we consider what is knowledge and reality. These are philosophical questions belonging to the study of metaphysics, ontology and epistemology. And I do not propose to so far as its logic is clearly and explicitly spells out and its relationship to other knowledge is clearly defined and established.

In some sense writing a thesis is like ascending a mountain. In the clutter below you cannot clearly see how the bits and pieces fit. Only as you climb up can you begin to distiguish a pattern. And, of course, you have elected to climb one peak so you believe in that theory or argument which is the basis of your mountain which in part you are building. The view may look a little different from other peaks. But from whatever peak you stand on relationship can be seen and arguments made about how the whole the individual hills and peaks fit together. Another way of saying this is that there are different perspectives from which to view the same data.

Apart form the large scale overview that can clearly be seen, the steps and paths up the mountain can be made more easy and smooth for those behind you to climb, i.e. your readers. In this sense there are major

choices of which path to take, and smaller decisions to remove a rock here and lop off a branch there. In some sense the mountain is your thesis and the path is your discourse organization to make that mountain easy to climb, and the minor smoothing of the path are making the language and smaller surface discourse features easier for your climber or reader.

I currently have a student working on a thesis about writing, or more specifically about the citation practices of NNS thesis writers. The fact that these subjects are NNSs are to some extent irrelevant. What is emerging from the data is that the language of each particular thesis or its surface discourse features reflects in a much deeper way the beliefs or attitudes to knowledge of the students researchers. And these attitudes are connected with the previous experiences the students have had with writing and learning. Only a few of the subjects seem able to develop a truly critical research perspective that leads to the kind of thesis writing that is most highly valued. In other words the problems for thesis writing is not necessarily one of being a NNS writer, but of being an inexperienced researcher or learner, and can only be solved through a lengthy process of being an apprentice researcher. NNSs have exactly the same problem if they are not experienced researchers.

There may be particular problems of discourse that Indonesian students may experience in writing critically as I have noticed that in the exchanges from the floor during the TEFLIN conference the Indonesian students mostly started by saying that they agreed with the speaker even though they intended later to say that they absolutely disagreed. Even for native speaking thesis students of English it is regarded as presumptuous for them to totally refute more experienced researchers', finding, but there are ways of writing critically about previous findings that are acceptable by modifying one's criticism and certainly by placing one's critical comments in some contextual framework. It may well be that supervisors need to teach their students ways in which to accomplish such critical comments.

Now I will turn to a selection of some of the common surface language errors found in the academic writing of Indonesian students. The examples have been taken from actual theses but I have altered the examples in both content and the type of the research they refer to. So the example may have been taken from a thesis to do with reading that I will alter it to make it seem as if it comes from a thesis about spoken language., etc. If anyone thinks that the data has been taken from their

thesis because of the topic they may well be mistaken. I have done this to protect students. I do not speak Bahasa Indonesia and you may well recognize that some of these errors are due to transfer from the student's L1.

- 1a *English in Indonesia is **emphasized on** reading comprehension.
- 1b In Indonesia **the emphasis** in English Language teaching **falls on** reading comprehension.
- 1c In English, reading comprehension is emphasized in Indonesia.
- 1d Reading comprehension in English is emphasized in Indonesia.

In English sentences 1b or 1d would be preferable. The verb "emphasize" is a transitive non-unaccusative verb which requires an agent doer to act as grammatical subject in the active voice, e.g. "The speaker emphasized the importance of reading comprehension." The error in 1a probably arose as the writer tried to write a topic comment sentence, which is illustrated in 1c. However, English unlike most Asian languages is not a language where the grammar allows topic comment structures as a matter of course. In English grammar the imperative is for the grammatical subject which is usually the active agent to appear as early in the sentence structure as possible. The preposition "on" is never used with the verb emphasize, only with the noun "emphasis".

- 2a *Johns **describes that** the students had difficulty with the task.
- 2b Johns **pinted out that** the students had difficulty with the task.
- 2c Johns describes the difficulty that the students had with the task.
- 2d Johns describes what difficulty the students had with the task.

The verb "describes" can take a noun or a noun clause starting with "what" but not a noun clause starting with "that" because the problem or "difficulty" must be the object that is described and not the fact that there was a difficulty.

- 3a *Reading ability in general is not **satisfying**.
- 3b Reading ability in general is not **satisfactory**.

The writer uses a verb where an adjective is required. Ability cannot be a subject agent hence it cannot be followed by a transitive verb like satisfy, which requires an agentive subject, e.g. "He is satisfying his clients." "Satisfying" means some desire is

being met whereas "satisfactory" means a good enough standard has been achieved.

- 4a *Smith and Johnson (1999) **observe** the unsatisfactory results and point out that...
- 4b Smith and Johnson (1999) **note** the unsatisfactory results and point that...

While "observe" can sometimes be used as a verb meaning "to make a comment", as soon as "results" is used as its object we are forced to think of the classical experiment in which results are observed by the experimenter and this is not the meaning intended here by the writer, who means rather that the writer drew attention to the results already observed.

- 5a *Such reports suggest a serious **concern of** English language teaching is reading comprehension...
- 5b Such reports suggest a serious **concern for** English language teaching is the lack of reading comprehension...

"A concern of" means it is a matter which properly belongs to or is studied by that academic discipline, e.g. "the study of the physical properties of matter is the concern of physics"; whereas "a concern for" means it is a matter which is a problem that must be dealt with as in sentence 5b.

- 6a *The challenge **to make a study that may uncover** the truth about...
- 6b The challenge **for a study is to uncover** the truth about...
- 7a This study **is made** to study the effect of cultural background on language learning.
- 7b This study **was conducted** to study the effect of cultural background on language learning.
- 7c This project **studied** the effect of cultural background on language learning.
- 8a *Smith (1980) found that learners **make negotiations** with other learners to produce comprehensible messages.
- 8b Smith (1980) found that learners **negotiated** with other learners to produce comprehensible messages.

As 6a, 7a and 8a illustrate, there is general tendency amongst Indonesian ESL writers to overuse the word "make" as a

causative verb where it is unnecessary. This may be due to L1 transfer.

- 9a *When a learner's **expectation is** met, he/she continues.
- 9b When a learner's **expectations are** met, he/she continues.

In general, the English idiom "to meet expectations" is always used in the plural idiomatically.

- 10a *It is **hardly found** an American who does not know Kentucky Fried Chicken.
- 10b It is **hard to find** an American who does not know Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Usually with the verb find we can say: "Hardly any trace of poison was found in the water", where "hardly" modifies the thing being looked for not the verb or process of "finding". But in the example sentence the writer means the finding is hard because there are so few of them. This way of saying this is a standard idiomatic expression in English.

- 11a *These factors seem **to be influential on** students' comprehension.
- 11b These factors seem **to influence** students' comprehension.

On the surface this problem seems similar to that in example 1 where the preposition "on" is incorrectly inserted together with an unnecessary passive form of the verb. In English "influence" is a noun-unaccusative transitive verb taking an active agent.

- 12a *In **another research** the opposite results were found...
- 12b In **another study** the opposite results were found...
- 13a *The next group of **research studies on** listening comprehension are those that focussed on...
- 13b The next group of **research studies on** listening comprehension are those that focussed on...

The word "research" in English is an abstract noun for the process and is not used to refer to a particular project or study as was incorrectly done in 12a and 13a.

- 14a ***Many criticisms have been addressed to** simplification.
- 14b **Much criticism has addressed** simplification.

The word "criticism" is generally used as uncountable in research. The verb "address" is used in English meaning "to be concerned with" or "directed at". Idiomatically as shown in 14 b this is expressed in the active voice in English.

15a *Brown (1980) **calls** the system of interlanguage as a an ongoing process...

15 Brown (1980) **calls** the system of interlanguage an ongoing process...

Indoensia ESL writers often seem to overuse "as a" with verbs which native speakers do not use it.

16a ESL learner's output cannot be viewed **apart from** the context in which it is uttered.

16b ESL learner's output cannot be viewed **in isolation from** the context in which it is uttered.

"Apart from" means "besides" and has the sense that something is being added, whereas the writer means that the two things cannot be separated.

17a *The study by Smit (1999) **revealed two main categories** for language acquisition ...

17b The study by Smith (1999) **argued that there are two main categories** for language acquisition...

The word "reveal" is vastly overused by research writers in English. The word "reveal" means that an active agent exposes something to the sight of someone else. In 17a there is no active agent and since "categories" are in themselves abstract groupings concrete items that can be seen, this makes the use of "reveal" incorrect. What the writer means is that the research writers are creating an argument and this is better expressed by 17b.

18a *The student were willing to participate in **questionnaire answering**.

18b The student were willing to participate in **answering the questionnaire**.

19a *Due to their **vocabulary limitation**, the students...

19b Due to their **lack of vocabulary**, the students.../Due to their **limited vocabulary**, the student...

There appears to be a general tendency amongst Asian of English to construct simple noun phrases that have a string of attributives (often just another noun as in 19a) followed by a single noun, where as noun phrases in English are often gerundive containing a gerund and an object of the gerund such as in 18b or two or more nouns joined with a preposition as in 19b.

19a *This approach **was done given that** the purpose of the study was to study listening comprehension.

19b This approach **was used as** the purpose of the study was to study listening comprehension.

Another verb which is often overused is "done" as in 19a. This may be related do the problem of insterting a causative as discussed above in 6 through 8.

20a *A **third alternative** was to...

20b A **third possibility** was to...

An alternative means that there are only two possible choices so that logically there there cannot be an alternative given there choices.

21a ***Concerning with the interaction**, Figure 5 shows that was interaction between gender and level of proficiency.

21b Figure 5 shows that there was interacion between gender and level of proficiency.

21a contains a redundant phrase which appears to be an attempt again to create a topic comment style which is not natural to English grammar or discourse.

22a *Anderson and Smith (1975) **summarized that** ten variables affect second language learning.

22b Anderson and Smith (1975) **summarized previous studies and concluded that** ten variables affect second language learning.

The verb "summarised" cannot be followed by a noun clause starting with "that". This error is similar to that discussed in example 2.

23a *We **find out** that the majority of learners are affected by anxiety in the classroom.

23b We **found** that the majority of learners are affected by anxiety in the classroom.

The phrasal verb verb "find out" and the verb "find" are often confused. "Find out" means to find out something like a specific secret, but "find" as intended by the writer means that the research established the truth about something.

24a *This theory will be the **base** of this study.

24b This theory will be the **basis** of this study.

"Base" implies something physical whereas "basis" is an abstract or theoretical concept. The verb "base" also gives problems. ESL writers often write "basing on" when they mean "based on".

25a *Brown (1971) assigned learning strategies to seven **classifications**.

25b Brown (1971) arranged learning strategies in seven **classes**.

25c Brown (1971) divided learning strategies into seven **categories**.

26a *Smith (1991) did not clearly **classify** good language learners from less good ones.

26b Smith (1991) did not clearly **distinguish** good language learners from less good ones.

27a *Smith (1991) **grouped** the strategies into two groups.

27b Smith (1991) **classified** the strategies into two groups.

Examples 25 through 27 illustrate some of the problems writers have with two sets of words with the roots: "class" and "category". These words are tricky. Basically, a "class" means some kind of group of items belonging together, such that the various groups are in some hierarchical relationship to one another, whereas categories are not necessarily in any such relationship. The act of assigning an item to a class group is to classify it as an X, or place it in class X, but in order to do so we "distinguish" it from other items using certain criteria or a classification scheme. We can also group data or items according to categories, and in doing so we categorise the item as X, or assign it to category X. When we set out to make classes or

categories we can arrange or divide items into classes or categories.

28a *This measured the **frequency of a learner** using dictionaries.

28b This measured the **frequency with which a learner used** dictionaries.

Logically it is not the frequency of the learner but the usage which is being measured.

29a *The study investigates what skills **have correlation with** intelligence.

29b The study investigates what skills **correlate with** intelligence.

Another example of the unnecessary introduction of a verb "have" where the noun used can be a verb used in its own right.

30a ***Referring to the theories above**, the learners make use of...

30b **From the theories above**, we can see that the learners make use of...

In sentence 30a by using a participial phrase which describes the learners, the writer implies that the learners refer to the theories, when in fact the writer simply means that if the reader refers to the theories, the reader can understand what the learners are doing, i.e. that the theories explain the learners' behaviour. This overuse of participial phrase is fairly common in ESL writing. ESL writers should be cautioned about using what is in fact a very Latin based construction in English and one which often leads to errors known as misrelated or unrelated partial phrases.