

LEXICAL VARIATION IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstrak

Variasi leksikal menunjukkan variasi kata yang digunakan dalam tulisan siswa. Fokus dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menyelidiki variasi leksikal dalam tulisan akademik mahasiswa dan faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap variasi dalam tulisan mereka. Penelitian deskriptif ini menggunakan bagian pendahuluan proposal tesis mahasiswa sebagai sumber data. 30 bagian pengantar proposal tesis mahasiswa dikumpulkan dan dianalisis untuk mengungkap variasi leksikal dalam tulisan mereka. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kata-kata yang digunakan mahasiswa dalam tulisan mereka kurang bervariasi dan didominasi oleh kata benda. Selain itu, pengetahuan kosa kata siswa dan masalah mereka dalam pengetahuan morfologi menjadi faktor yang mempengaruhi variasi leksikal dalam tulisan akademik mereka. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa siswa belum mampu menggunakan berbagai variasi kata dalam tulisan mereka. Dengan demikian, diharapkan kepada siswa untuk meningkatkan pengetahuan kosa kata mereka untuk memperkaya tulisan mereka sehingga mampu menghasilkan tulisan yang lebih kaya dan lebih baik.

Kata Kunci: Variasi Leksikal; Menulis Akademik; Mahasiswa.

Abstract

Lexical variation demonstrates word variations utilized in university students' writing. The focus of this study was to investigate the lexical variation in students' academic writing and factors contributing to the variations in their' writing. The data sources for this descriptive study were the introduction portions of the thesis proposals submitted by the students. To identify lexical variance in students' writing, thirty introduction portions from their thesis proposals were gathered and examined. The results showed that university students used fewer different terms in their writing and that nouns predominated in their compositions. Furthermore, the morphological knowledge gaps and vocabulary knowledge of the students were the elements impacting the lexical variations in their academic writing. This study came to the conclusion that pupils were still unable to use a variety of terms in their writing based on its findings. Therefore, it was anticipated that the students would increase their vocabulary in order to write more effectively and to generate work that was richer and better.

Keywords: *Lexical Variations; Academic Writing; University Students.*

INTRODUCTION

A good academic writing is characterized by a number of features, including coherence, meaningful connections between ideas, proper use of punctuation, and grammatical accuracy.

Additionally, some scholars suggest that language choices also become crucial in academic writing since they have an impact on the author's intended meaning. Experts such as Soles (2011), Bailey (2011), and Cali, (2015) argue that a good academic

writing should be concise and straightforward, and it should be worded simply in order to express the points in the writing in an engaging style. They add that effective writers are succinct and precise; they make an effort to avoid using extraneous words and pick the right phrases to express the content (Cali, 2015; Soles, 2010).

As one of the language knowledge areas, vocabulary is commonly used to gauge students' progress in learning the language, particularly when it comes to writing. When producing an academic text, students need to consider a number of factors, including using proper and precise vocabulary and avoiding repetition and redundancy. For this reason, lexical richness, also known as vocabulary richness, is listed among the characteristics of excellent academic writing by scholars like Marvern & Richards (2012) and Laufer & Nation (1995). They contend that readers will probably benefit from a well-used, rich vocabulary. Furthermore, according to Read (2000), students who can employ a variety of words are less likely to use the same words repeatedly since they can use synonyms, superordinate, and other related words.

In recent years, the discussion about vocabulary or lexical aspects in second/foreign language students' writing has attracted much interest. Nation (2007) and Laufer (1995) emphasize the necessity of examining how students utilize vocabulary to produce written works and to gain a better understanding of their language knowledge in general. Hence, several metrics have been developed specifically for assessing L2 students' vocabulary use in writing. Jacobs et al. (1981) include vocabulary variations as one of the writing sub-skills to be judged while Siskova (2012) has proposed different measures of lexical richness; they are lexical diversity to measure the number of different words used in a text, lexical sophistication to quantify how many advanced words being used, and lexical

density to reveal the proportion of content words in a text.

Writing is a crucial skill when studying English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly for students who are about to enter their last year of study at university. They must work very hard to ensure that the research papers they write are comprehensible and clear for the intended audience. To reach this target, university students must show their writing competency by utilizing a variety of words to produce an advanced academic English style. According to a study by Lemmouh (2008), university students' academic success is highly correlated with the use of sophisticated words and other lexical elements. The use of diverse vocabulary signifies the fact that the students have read a wide range of English texts and have absorbed them in a rather methodical way. Using various word choices also encourages variations in writing, which helps to prevent an essay from having a boring or repetitive tone.

Several language scholars have been interested in studies concerning lexical richness or lexical variations in the writing of university students. However, investigations in this topic have not been very substantial. Breeze (2008) and Douglas (2012) concluded that there is a strong correlation between EFL college students' writing proficiency and lexical richness. It was further discovered that the writing of low-proficiency students typically had smaller lexical variations and fewer uses of academic words, but more uses of high-frequency words (Breeze, 2008). In addition, Siskova (2012) also ascertains a substantial link between lexical richness and the quality of students' writing in the context of Czech EFL students in her research. In Indonesia, studies on the lexical richness in students' writing have been only conducted by few researchers. Saputro (2005), Mahardika (2015), Djwandono (2016), Anandi & Mukarto (2023) are some of the scholars who have

studied lexical richness in Indonesian students' writing.

This current study investigated the university students' ability to utilize various words in writing an academic text. Investigating this subject may significantly assist lecturers to figure out their students' written discourse expression skills and assess how well their vocabulary and writing courses are working. The findings of this study could serve as a foundation for improving the writing and vocabulary course designs.

METHOD

The present study utilized a descriptive analysis method to answer the research question about the lexical variety of English graduate students' thesis proposal. The authors of this study did not look for any variable correlations, test any hypotheses, or make any predictions; instead, they described and analysed the condition as it was after presenting the descriptive data analysis (Gay, 2011).

The primary source of data in this study was the thesis proposals written by English graduate students. Those proposals had been presented in the proposal seminar from July to December 2017. Data in this study were taken from Chapter 1 or the introduction section of the thesis proposals. This section was chosen since it had the majority of the students' distinctive ideas compared to the two other chapters that were primarily composed of citations and general ideas of research procedures.

All words contained in the introduction section of students' proposal were collected and listed in a folder. Then, the authors counted the frequency of each word used in the proposal. After that, the data were analyzed, and the lexical variety was measured using the Type-Token Ratio (TTR) formula as below:

$$\text{TTR} = \frac{\text{Number of different words (type)}}{\text{Total Number of words (token)}}$$

The researchers utilized Ms. Excel to help them calculate the TTR index. Then, the results were analyzed by following the related theories. Halliday (1985) and Johansson (2009) in assert that TTR is ranged between 0 – 1. Higher index of the TTR implies that the text has rich variation of vocabulary. On the other hand, if the TTR index is low, there is no variation of words used in a text.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

After analyzing vocabulary variations utilized by the students in writing the introduction section of their thesis proposal, this study obtained the TTR index for 0.34. The detail data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Results of Type-Token Ratio (TTR)

Categories	Total
Average Token	1508
Average Type	457
Average Token per type	3.03
TTR	0.33

As Table 1 presents, the total words (token) utilized in the introduction section of students' proposal are 1508 words and the total types are 457, so the TTR index is 0.33. This means that one word was used at least three times in the writing. The result of this analysis implies that the variety of vocabulary employed by English graduate students in writing the introduction section of thesis proposal was still low. Students often repeated similar words in their writing. This implies that they do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge.

To achieve a more detailed result, the result of TTR index from the students' composition was compared to common word lists and the Academic Word List (AWL) by Coxhead (2000). The first and second most frequent 1000-word lists are based on the General Service Collection (GSL) of English words (West & West, 1953), a list of the most helpful 2000-word

families for English learners. Then, the AWL itself has 3000 vocabulary terms derived from 570 headwords commonly used in higher education and frequently used as a reference to help students prepare for college and academic life, such as "conduct," "attain," "perform," and "indicate." The frequency of vocabulary used by students might be assessed by comparing their composition to the AWL, allowing lecturers to consider the vocabulary knowledge required for students to write academic papers in English. Table 2 displays the result of comparing the words utilized in the introduction section against the AWL.

Table 2. Comparison of Words in the Introduction Section

Categories	Token	Type	TTR
1 st 1000 common word list	1051	341	0.32
2 nd 1000 common word list	361	98	0.27
Academic Word List	96	18	0.18
Total	1508	457	0.33

Table 2 displays that the students employed relatively little variation of vocabulary in the introduction section of their proposal for the first 1000 common wordlist, as suggested by Halliday (1985) and Johansson (2009), using a scale of 0 to 1. It only accounts for 0.32, which is closer to 0 than 1. In other words, even if students created a high number of tokens, it may be assumed that the majority of students were likely to utilize the same frequent vocabulary repeatedly because there were just a few varieties. Similarly, the percentage of type and token in the second 1000 wordlist generates a lower index. The results show that the lexical variation for vocabulary in the second 1000 wordlist is generally lower than the lexical variation for vocabulary in the first 1000 wordlist. The lexical variety index of the students'

composition is 0.27 in this case. When the academic word list is taken into account, the results show an even lower index. The percentage of AWL tokens in the students' composition is low, and the ratio of types produced by students who belong to this list is remarkably low. Students utilized terms like "conduct," "indicate," and "demonstrate" that were linked to the given topic and fit within the AWL. In terms of lexical variety, the TTR score obtained is 0.18 which indicates that students use a limited vocabulary that is regarded useful in an academic setting.

Discussion

These results demonstrate that there is still a strong tendency for word repetition. The distribution of content results, which show that many words are repeated frequently, particularly popular, or daily words, support it. This result is consistent with Halliday's assertion of opinion (Halliday, 1985). He claims that a text's lexical variety increases with the breadth of its vocabulary. Due to the students' usage of a consistent language in writing the introductory part, the lexical variation index in this study is small. Additionally, the outcome of the lexical diversity index reflects students' vocabulary proficiency. The higher the lexical variation, the richer the vocabulary possessed by the students. It is assumed that students' vocabulary knowledge is insufficient based on the research's findings. According to Kondal (2015), the lexical diversity count offers a useful check on the use of different words in the text that the students are supposed to become familiar with. One could argue that students did not fully utilize their vocabulary knowledge. As a result, there are numerous repetitions and little lexical variety in the opening part.

In addition, the current study found that students continued to utilize a lot of generic language in the beginning to their thesis proposals. Students' writing still contained a number of terms like "thing," "people," "way," "do," "create," "get," "use," and

"have." With the use of these terms, students' writing became less academic, and it also appears that the opening to their thesis proposals is less formal. As English graduate students, the samples in this study should optimally utilize the academic word in their writing because they are thought to possess a higher academic level. They should have enough practice in writing and are able to search more precise words. Students can also use dictionaries to look up more academic terms to use in their work. However, findings in this study found the opposite results. The data analysis result shows that the use of academic words was especially low. It is considered that students still do not fully utilize their vocabulary in writing, particularly when writing an introduction. They make less of an effort to write about other vocabularies; they nonetheless employ popular terminology in the introduction part.

In general, these findings show that some words relevant to the topic presented in the introduction section of students' thesis proposal can be used in different academic contexts. Although the AWL produced by students are not always common or easy words in English, they are vital for academic performance, according to various experts (Coxhead, 2000b; Mackiewicz, 2016). Thus, students need to get used to utilize the words in this wordlist in writing an academic text. Although the TTR procedure for assessing variation has been criticized for its dependence on text length (Malvern & Richards, 2012; McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010), the results of this study might still offer some small insight into students' language proficiency that a vocabulary exam cannot gauge.

This finding suggests that the extent of one's vocabulary plays a role in the construction of second language production in general. Students at a higher level simply make use of a sufficient amount of vocabulary to produce, develop, and communicate ideas in their writing (Raimes, 1985 Juanggo, 2018) . As the

most basic measurement of lexical proficiency, vocabulary size is frequently used to distinguish students with good L2 proficiency from those with poor L2 proficiency (Laufer, 1995). According to Meara (1996), maintaining a successful command of the English language will encourage students in practically every element of second language acquisition, including improving receptive and productive skills. In terms of productive skills, the aspect of vocabulary knowledge is frequently associated with another aspect called organization (Meara, 1996), which is concerned with students' capacity to handle the words they have in their thoughts in order to produce language in either written or spoken form. This level of organization is regulated and connects the lexical connectivity that forms the students' mental lexicon (Gyllstad, 2013).

The findings of this study are in line with some of the findings of prior studies. According to Engber (1993), there is a significant association between lexical variation and writing performance. The use of a wide vocabulary is a result of having greater vocabulary knowledge, and it correlates and has a positive impact on the degree of writing in the second language (Kwon, 2009). As a result, students with a large vocabulary are more likely to generate written compositions with a variety of word choices and sound grammatical structures than those who lack this dimension. Furthermore, Siskova (2012) found positive correlation between lexical variation and lexical sophistication in a study of lexical richness in narrative texts written by Czech EFL learners. Students who produced more complex vocabulary in their narrative writing had higher lexical variation indexes than students who had lower lexical variation indexes.

In addition to the impact of language skill level and the capacity to write using a variety of words, as previously mentioned by other studies (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Siskova, 2012), the quality of input used in the teaching situation and the students'

knowledge of other languages are two further factors that may have an impact on their capacity to develop sophisticated and potent lexical items. The first factor is concerned with pedagogical issues, whereas the second is concerned with the cognitive aspects of learners and their ability to perceive semantic relationships between words, such as their understanding of cognates or false friends.

Another finding of the current study reveals that language ability seems to have no influence on students' capacity to construct a written text with a varied and sophisticated vocabulary. There are a few circumstances that could lead to this conclusion. One of them is that the students may recognize the topics in their thesis proposal because they selected them based on their interests in English language learning. Students may benefit from any prior information they have about the topics. According to Lee and Anderson (2007), background information plays a critical role in second language learning, whether in terms of receptive or productive skills. Students will be able to retain and develop on the discussed subject more easily if they have prior knowledge and are comfortable with it. Tedick (1988), in Juanggo (2018) suggests that engagement with the issue will encourage students to increase the quality of their writing performance. Moreover, Long (1990) found that the knowledge of a topic had a beneficial impact on students' writing practice.

The results of this study suggest that the university students did not employ a variety of terms when writing their papers, which could be due to things like limited vocabulary knowledge. As college students, particularly those pursuing master's degrees, they should be more conscious of the usage of academic and technical terminology in writing a text. Moreover, the students should also be encouraged to utilize academic words and less common lexical items. Students will become accustomed to employing a wider

variety of words in their writing as they utilize those academic and less common words more frequently.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to determine the lexical variation of language used by Indonesian EFL students at university in written discourse, and it was discovered that the TTR index, which indicates lexical variation in the introduction portion of students' proposals, was low. Meanwhile, the type-token ratio (TTR) index can be used to determine the quality of writing. A high lexical variety is indicated by a high TTR index. It signifies that the students employ a wide range of words to create a well-written English text. This result might be unsatisfying since the students are expected to have higher vocabulary proficiency. As university students, especially in the graduate program, they are required to master a wide range of vocabulary.

However, this study also maintains several limitations. First, the scope of this study is limited to specific subjects, and it uses a small number of texts, making it impossible to generalize the findings. Another study with the same scope and a bigger number of participants and texts should be conducted in the future to obtain a more comprehensive conclusion. Second, the fact that lexical variation was measured using only one method should be taken into account. In fact, numerous methodologies to measuring lexical characteristics might be used, and the findings may not always be the same.

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