Publication-Related Policy and Student Agency in Postgraduate Program of English Language Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

Following Indonesian education policy, universities in Indonesia assign students to publish a scholarly article in at least a nationally accredited journal to accomplish their master's degree. This study aims to identify and describe student agency in implementing the publication-related policy. The role of agency in learning is so essential and, yet, agency on the part of learners has not been a major concern in studies of agency. So far studies on student agency have mostly focused on assessment and there has been no research, if any, on student agency in responding to a policy related to scholarly publications in higher education. This study filled the gap by examining agentic strategies used by students of a postgraduate English department at a government university in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This research is a case study involving three (3) postgraduate English department students who were selected purposively. Data collection of the study was conducted by doing in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview was used in which open and close-ended questions about students' agentiC strategies in responding to the publication-related policy were given. The data form the interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Findings demonstrated the students employed several strategies in responding to the publication policy, which involve utilizing varied online resources, seeking feedback from lecturers and peers, and voluntarily participating in various writing workshops. As students live under varying constraints, further study needs to be conducted to uncover more students' agentic strategies in responding to publication-related policy.

Keywords: *Student Agency; Publication-Related Policy; Higher Education*

Introduction

Following the recent Indonesian education policy, universities in Indonesia have emphasized publishing postgraduate research papers in either internationally or nationally accredited scholarly journals. Students at the master's degree level are required to publish at least one scholarly article in an international academic journal with recognition or at least in a nationally accredited journal level 3, the so-called *Sinta 3,* to accomplish their degree (Ministry of Research and Higher Education regulation, number 50/2018). The need for implementing the publication policy is related to the benefits of scientific publications for students. In addition to developing students' argumentation skills and ability to explain

information and problems thoroughly, as proof of their competence to continue their education to a higher level [1], writing for publication is also very useful to enhance their job career and promotion [2].

Given the obligations and benefits of scientific publications, postgraduate students would be encouraged to write scientific publications as one of the prerequisites for graduation. However, many of them find difficulties or obstacles in publishing their articles. Research by [3] in Thailand shows that master's students experience many difficulties in the process of writing scientific articles in addition to problems related to aspects of language such as sentence structure, vocabulary, and tenses. In the same context, [4] found that apart from language factors, motivational factors, emotions, psychology and lack of support from student colleagues also contributed to students' difficulties in publishing scholarly articles. In Indonesia, a study by [5] found that in writing scientific articles for international publications, master's students still have problems in several aspects such as expressing claims or positions, text organization, structuring arguments, language aspects, and expressing the claims or position of the writer as the most common difficulties faced by students. Another study in Indonesia was conducted by [6] who found other problems faced by master students in writing for scientific publications such as finding topics, research gaps, related literature, limited research time, fear of the review process, and fear of having their articles rejected by journals. More recently, a study by [7] revealed for main areas of difficulties that master's degree students found which include grammar accuracy, genre, L1 transfer to L2 writing production, and academic vocabulary. Student difficulties in academic writing were also found in a postgraduate English language teaching department of a government university in West Nusa Tenggara related to the issues with linguistic aspects and the development of ideas due to a lack of student reading [8].

Those studies on the difficulties of master's students in writing for scholarly publications suggest the need for sufficient support from both lecturers and institutions for students especially to deal with their problems with writing for publication. Regarding lecturer's support for students, [9] conducted a study on lecturer agency in overcoming learning difficulties for postgraduate English department students. In this study, it was found that with pedagogical competence, professional competence, and length of experience teaching and guiding master's students, lecturers carry out their agency by collaborating with other lecturers to assist students in overcoming their learning difficulties by assigning students to make papers as a component of the final exam in their course and by providing workshops on academic writing and writing for publications.

However, studies on lecturers' support for students so far have been mostly on helping students with learning content mastery and not on the development of student agency in the learning and teaching process. Agency is a major component of professionalism in higher education which is conditioned by creativity, collaboration, and dynamics [10]. Agency is also interpreted as an active strategy for overcoming and responding to various challenges at hand including the ones related to education policy [11]. Therefore, with agency, a student will always be responsive to educational policies by being actively, creatively, and collaboratively involved. [12] study revealed students' positive perceptions of publishing academic papers in higher education as the students reported that they gained personal and professional benefits from the publication despite many challenges.

A study by [13] found students' agentic strategies to deal with the challenges in publishing their academic papers by joining mentorship, academic writing workshops, and coaching. Other studies found several agentic strategies by scheduling regular writing time, forming writing groups having both supervisor and peer feedback [14] and by making use of online resources [15]. In connection with the obligation of scientific publication as a prerequisite for graduating from college at the master's degree level, students with their agency would implement various strategies for the success of these scientific publications and this will also be examined in this research.

The role of agency in learning is so essential and, yet, agency on the part of learners has not been a major concern in studies of agency. So far studies on student agency have mostly focused on assessment [16], [17] and there has been no research, if any, on student agency in responding to a policy related to scholarly publications in higher education, especially in West Nusa Tenggara context. For this reason, this study was conducted to explore agency of postgraduate English department students in a state university in West Nusa Tenggara in responding to scholarly publication-related policy as one of the requirements for graduating from college at the master's level. The study aimed to identify and describe various agentic strategies used by the students in responding to the publication-related policy as one of the prerequisites for graduating with a master's degree. The results of the study would contribute to providing useful information about resources and pedagogical choices that support the development of student agency in writing publications in particular and in learning in general. The study could also be used as feedback for policymakers at the university in facilitating lecturers and students to have more effective and quality teaching and learning activities.

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative approach was used in this study as it aims to identify and provide a detailed description of student agency in responding to scholarly publication-related policy in a postgraduate English department in a government university in West Nusa Tenggara. Using a qualitative approach is important to explain a case more objectively from the research subjects' point of view and not from the researcher's perspective [18].

As this study investigates the processes and events occurring in a particular program, a case study was employed. This research design is well-suited for research in educational implementation and activities because it allows the researcher to investigate thoroughly the object of the study for a richer description [19].

Participants

The participants of the study involved one male (Agung) and two female students (Lani and Lia) who were doing their master's degree in English language education at a state university in West Nusa Tenggara Indonesia. The same as other students, they were required to publish scholarly articles in an international journal or at least a nationally accredited journal level 3 (SINTA 3) as part of their graduation requirements. The reasons for selecting the three participants were that they were in the final year of their study and they were the ones whose papers were under the review process by in an international journal or at least a nationally accredited journal level 3 (SINTA 3).

Data Collection Technique

In-depth interviews with students were conducted to collect data to understand student agency in agency in responding to scholarly publication-related policy. As [20] claims, in-depth interviews are important for collecting information about human perceptions, points of view, and experiences, unobservable through other techniques of data collection. Semi-structured interview mode was employed in which a prepared list of questions was followed and sequenced variously depending on the interview situation. Both open and closed-ended interview questions were given to the students which were audio-recorded. The interview questions included questions about students' agentic strategies in responding to the publication-related policy.

Data Analysis Technique

Content analysis was employed in this study. The data obtained from interviewing the participants were coded according to the themes found in the interview. The codes were then cross-tabulated in a working table. The next step was classifying the codes under common categories and subcategories. After that, the categories and subcategories were described by defining them and by providing examples for each. Finally, the findings were then explained by communicating them with those of other similar studies and theories.

Findings

Findings in this study include the result of in-depth interviews with three student participants which was analyzed by qualitative content analysis. The main findings of this study revealed several students' agentic strategies in responding to the scholarly publication-related policy. The students indicated that they utilized varied online resources such as Google search engine, Google translate, and Grammarly for their writing practice and process. Seeking feedback from lecturers and peers to avoid problems with ideas, content, grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary was another agentic strategy that the students used. Moreover, they voluntarily participated in various writing workshops to develop their knowledge and skills in writing for publication.

Agentic Strategy in Using Varied Online Resources

Concerning using varied online resources, all the participants interviewed expressed that their use of *Google's* online search engine, *Google Translate,* and *Grammarly* was voluntary. Without any prior instructions or guidance from their lecturers, they voluntarily utilized them to help them with their writing for publication. They acknowledged that they heavily relied on the help of those online resources as they were very useful for their writing practices and processes despite limited internet access on campus. The following interview excerpts show the participants' agentic strategies in using online resources despite the challenging limited internet access.

Free WIFI Spots are available on campus, but they are on and off, so I use my internet connection most of the time. I should do this as I know I need to search many articles on Google to support my writing, especially the most recent ones. Otherwise, I can't publish my paper in an International Journal. (Agung)

 I frequently use Google Translate to help me better express my ideas in writing for publication in English. But sometimes the Internet connection on campus is not good, so I use my internet. It's okay as long as I can get ideas quickly so that I can publish my paper at least in Sinta 3. (Lia)

My reviewers of the Sinta 3 journal commented that I needed to pay attention to language accuracy. I had quite a lot of problems with sentence construction. This has made me rely on Grammarly which has been very helpful. I use it most of the time at home as my home WIFI internet connection was so good, different from the one on campus. (Lani)

Despite this challenging limited internet access, the students did not quit writing for publication. Even they looked for another strategy to progress in writing by having feedback from lecturers and peers which is described in the following section.

Seeking Feedback from Lecturers and Peers

Another major finding is that the students frequently reflected on their experience of having useful feedback from both lecturers and peers when engaging with writing for publication. Although the students managed to make use of online resources, they acknowledged that they still heavily needed

feedback from their lecturers and peers. They stated that by having feedback from them, not only could they learn from comments focusing on language accuracy, rhetorical elements of writing, and ideas, but also they became aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Based on the interview analysis, the students came to their lectures to have feedback on their papers and rhetorical elements and contents, while they expected feedback on accuracy from peers. The interview excerpts below show their agentic strategies in asking for feedback from lectures and peers for their papers.

Our master's degree program offered a writing-for-publication class, but I am still careless with what should be in the introduction, findings, and discussion section. Therefore, I go to the lecturers for this. As my lecturers have tight schedules, I make an appointment first to meet them. (Lani)

My lecturers have experience in publishing their papers in reputable international journals, so they are the ones I asked for feedback on the contents of my paper. I usually have consultations with them in the common room that the department has. This mostly happens during lunch break. That's why the consultation was short, it is very useful, though. (Agung)

I have learned English grammar and structures for many years. Even though I undertook an advanced grammar course at this master's level, I still found problems with constructing complex sentences. I am also still unsure which tenses I should use in my paper. To cope with this, I usually go to my colleagues who are more advanced in grammar and structure to give me feedback on these aspects. Although they can't give detailed feedback, it means a lot to me. (Lia)

Despite useful lecturers' and peers' feedback, they were within time constraints as both their lecturers and peers have tight schedules. Accordingly, they exercised their agency by joining several writing workshops and programs, and this is the focus of the following section.

Voluntarily Participating in Various Writing for Publication Workshops

From the analysis of interview data, the students' agentic strategy was also found during their participation in the university writing workshops to upgrade their knowledge and skills in publishing their papers. They recounted that they sacrificed their family weekend by joining various writing-for-publication workshops provided by the university to get clear and practical guidance on successful publication writing from experienced authors and journal reviewers. They confirmed that the workshops provided them with good examples of publications and reflection questions enabling them to recognize their weaknesses in writing and utilize strategic actions and available resources to cope with the weaknesses. The following interview excerpts show expressions of their agency to develop their writing through participating in writing-for-publication workshops.

As a married student with one son, I like to spend a weekend with my family. But this semester I should forget it. I prefer to attend writing for-publication workshops held mostly on Saturdays. If I don't attend the workshops, I will miss a lot of comprehensive and practical knowledge on how to write a successful publication. This is especially because the keynotes are reviewers of reputable international journals and they are also authors of such high-quality journals. (Agung)

We undertook writing-for-publication coursework in this master's program. But I need to have a clear idea of good paper writing. Workshops on publication writing usually give many examples of good writing for publication. Moreover, the examples mostly are the presenters' papers published in accredited international journals. I know that the university invites reviewers of reputable international journals. (Lia)

What I find very useful from writing-for-publication workshops is that they assign us to find the strong and weak points of model papers. This activity helps us to recognize and realize our strengths and weaknesses in our papers. (Lani)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify how postgraduate English department students exercise their agency in responding to publication-related policy. The findings of this study show that students were not passive recipients of the policy. Rather, they actively responded to the policy by exploring available resources in the university context, despite time constraints and technical problems. They could develop their awareness of the importance of paper publications and make use of those multiple resources to be able to write and publish their paper in the expected journals.

Using online resources is one of the agentic strategies employed by the students. Students were aware of the usefulness of online resources such as *Google's* online search engine, *Google Translate,* and *Grammarly.* They relied on these online resources to help them particularly with ideas, grammar, and sentence structure, although they oftentimes had to use their internet quota to get access to these resources. This finding then resonates with [15] finding which demonstrates that outside school time, with well-supported home WIFI, students made use of online resources to improve the quality of their writing.

Seeking opportunities to have feedback from both lecturers and feedback was another strategy that the agentic students used to improve their writing in several aspects such as content, rhetoric, and grammar, despite their lecturers' busy schedule. This is in line with a study by [14] which reported that the participant students exercise their agency by scheduling regular meetings with their supervisors and peers for their writing feedback before publishing their paper.

The students also exercised their agency by voluntarily participating in various writing-for-publication workshops. Those workshops were mostly conducted on Saturdays, meaning that they had to sacrifice their family time. As they realized that participating in the workshops was very useful for helping them with their publication, they had to sacrifice their family time. This is because those workshops were mostly conducted on Saturdays. This finding echoes a study by [13] which found that agentic students dealt with the challenges of publishing their academic papers by joining mentorship, academic writing workshops, and coaching.

Conclusion

This study examined various agentic strategies used by the students in responding to the publication-related policy as one of the prerequisites for graduating with a master's degree. Based on the findings of this study, the students exercise their agency in responding to the publication policy by using several strategies which involve utilizing varied online resources, seeking feedback from lecturers and peers as well as voluntarily participating in various writing workshops. Those strategies were used by the students despite many challenges such as time constraints to see their lecturers for feedback, sacrificing family time, and lack of internet access. This study would, therefore, argue that student agency is not a given capacity but skillful strategies to cope with the challenge at hand.

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