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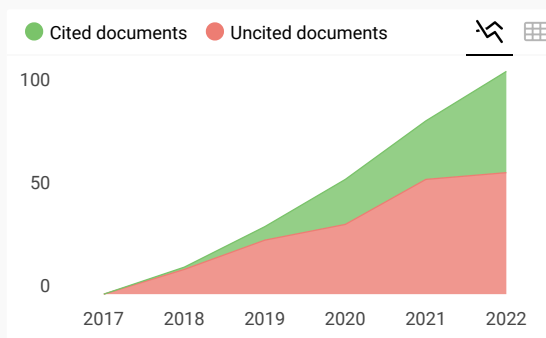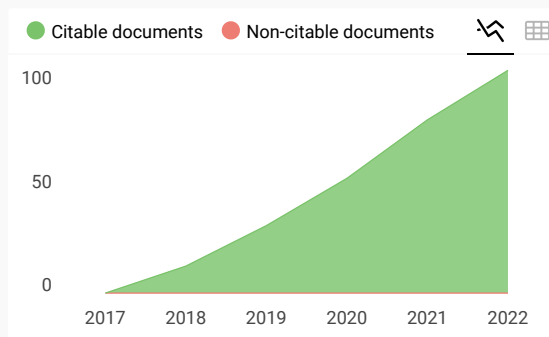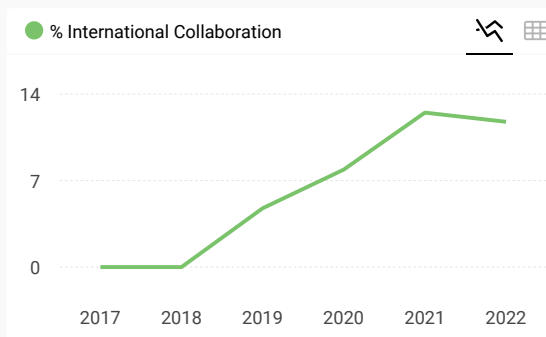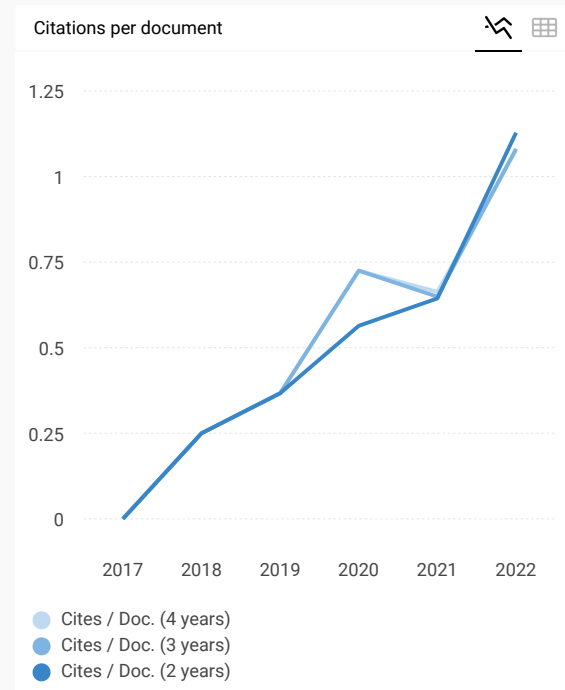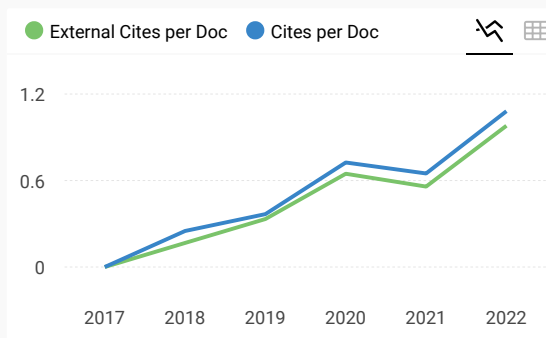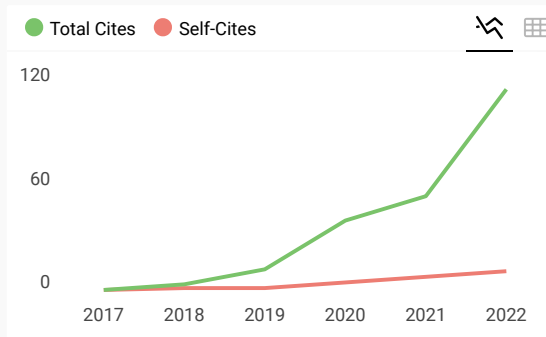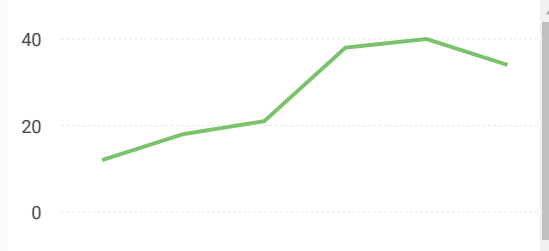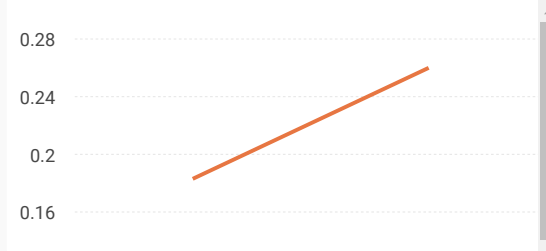
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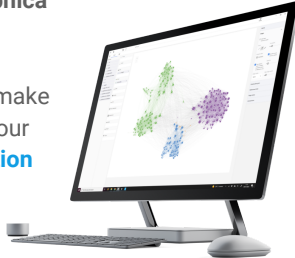
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Home > Archives > **Vol. 6, No. 3, 2022**

Vol. 6, No. 3, 2022

Table of Contents

Article

Indonesian Tertiary Education Students' Academic Writing Setbacks and Solutions

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Abstract
Writing is a crucial skill and tertiary education students face difficulties in academic writing. This paper aimed to identify the setbacks or difficulties and the solutions to the setbacks experienced by Indonesian tertiary education students in academic writing. A survey was used as the method of this study. The data were collected through a questionnaire using a Google form distributed to 26 fifth-semester students taking the Academic Writing course in the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, for the academic year 2019/2020. The survey results showed that, in general, the students faced setbacks in, for example, parts of speech, tenses, spelling, prepositions, vocabulary, punctuation, cohesion, discourse markers, writing paragraphs with a clear focus, constructing clear and coherent academic essays, paraphrasing, in-text referencing, and compiling a correct reference list. Concerning academic writing solutions, the results showed that lecturers should be trained and equipped with various writing strategies, feedback on the strengths and weaknesses was vital, and the students needed to improve their organization of ideas, for example. Other solutions were better language skills, language elements, critical thinking skills, paraphrasing, and referencing. Implications of the findings are that students and lecturers would understand and identify common setbacks in academic writing and have opportunities to adopt the suggested solutions to academic writing difficulties.

Keywords: academic writing; survey; tertiary education; writing setback

Introduction
Tertiary education generally requires students to complete many academic writing projects or assignments in the target language, English. To Indonesian tertiary education students, as non-native speakers of English, academic writing has remained challenging. Accordingly, it is urgent for the researchers to explore the students' academic writing problems or setbacks and propose solutions to the writing issues.

Although academic writing is crucial, particularly at the tertiary level, it is common to find students who strongly agree that they face complicated issues when trying to express themselves in written form (Hyland, 2002a; Hyland, 2002b; Hyland & Tse, 2004). There exist various arguments as to why non-native speakers of English encounter writing problems, for instance, low language proficiency, diction, and organization of ideas in paragraphs. As a result of this unfavorable situation, academic writing may tend to become a threat instead of a tool to assist them in performing well academically. Mutimani (2016, p.6) researched academic writing to investigate the challenges that "primary level Bachelor of Education students faced in academic writing at the Katima Mulilo Campus (KMC), University of Namibia." Mutimani (2016, p.6) also focused on "the students' and lecturers' perceptions of the possible causes of these academic writing challenges." The other two aspects to explore were "differences in writing challenges" based on "gender and the students' year of study" and "the possible intervention strategies that can be used to improve students' academic writing skills" Mutimani (2016, p.6).

The researchers have noticed that undergraduate students in the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University who are trained to possess a strong command of written (and spoken) English also face setbacks in academic writing. It is essential for students to improve their academic writing since it "is the primary form of communication at university and plays a role both in students' understanding of course content and consequently in the assessment of student knowledge that both contribute significantly to good grades and degrees" Mutimani (2016, p.20). Further, Mutimani (2016, p.21) states that "academic writing is an essential requirement where university students develop the proper tone, technique and style for their academic assignments". In academic writing, students are required to think critically and unbiasedly to convey ideas clearly and logically using a specific composition structure (Altiwal, 2012). EFL students may also face interference in the first language, idea issues, and vague writing assignment instructions (Chou, 2011). To resolve the students' academic writing problems, the researchers, therefore, conduct this study to investigate the setbacks in academic writing and then suggest solutions which will enable the students to develop their writing skills. It is expected that this study would offer implementable recommendations to those who are engaged in tackling Academic Writing courses at the tertiary education level. This study aims to identify the setbacks and the solutions to the setbacks experienced by Indonesian tertiary education students in academic writing. This study, therefore, attempts to answer the following questions. First, what are the setbacks experienced by Indonesian tertiary education students in academic writing? Second, what are the solutions to the setbacks experienced by the Indonesian tertiary education students in academic writing?.

Literature review

Writing, in general, is a complex process (Al Badi, 2015; Al-Harbi, & Troudi, 2020; Arindra, & Ardi, 2020; Bram, 2002; Budjalemba, & Listyani, 2020; He, 2020; Kiriakos, & Tienari, 2018; Tardy, 2017; Vincent, 2020) and academic writing, in particular, is a more complicated challenge even for native English speakers (Hyland, & Jiang, 2017). Therefore, it is even more difficult for students of English as a foreign language (Al Fadda, 2012). Academic writing is seen as a product of the mind since it integrates a cognitive and mental activity. It is usually performed by an intellectual community in which the people are engaged in active learning. According to Abdulkareem (2013, p.1553), academic writing is "The construction and development of techniques taught in universities such as organizing and generating students' ideas and critical thinking, and developing vocabulary and grammatical syntax."

Critical thinking and self-expression are some of the essential elements in academic writing. In addition, the ability to paraphrase and summarize is also indispensable in academic writing (Abdulkareem, 2013). Academic writing is inevitable for tertiary education students as they have to make research papers which require them to integrate other people's works as references into their own papers. Therefore, some basic rules are used as a guideline to produce a good product of academic writing. At the tertiary education level, students' success in academic writing is determined by their ability to comprehend and use others' ideas to voice their own opinion. There are some rules for an excellent academic writing product.

Al-Khasawneh (2010) identifies a number of problems in students' academic writing products. The first problem is related to the students' vocabulary level mastery. Tertiary education students, in particular, need to master a certain vocabulary level to be able to obtain good results in their projects. The second problem is grammatical accuracy which plays a vital role in conveying ideas accurately. Failure to use correct grammar will influence the delivery of the ideas by the readers. In addition to the problems related to the linguistic elements of language, students also have difficulties paraphrasing and citing correctly. The inability to paraphrase often leads to plagiarism because they simply copy and paste from others' work. Therefore, in addition to language element reinforcement, tertiary education students also need to know how to paraphrase and make citations correctly.

Previous studies on academic writing were conducted by Chen and Baker (2010, p.30), who "focused on lexical bundles in L1 and L2 academic writing", Elton (2010, p.151), who explored "academic writing and tacit knowledge," Pecorari (2003, p.317), who examined "plagiarism and patchwriting in academic second-language writing," and Canagarajah (2011, p.401), who studied "code meshing in academic writing" to discover "strategies of translanguaging."

Al Fadda (2012, p.123) aimed to "determine what difficulties King Saud University students encounter when learning to write academic English and to differentiate between students' learning needs and objectives." Based on the data collected from 50 postgraduate students, Al Fadda (2012, p.123) pointed out that the students faced "many difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, such as difficulty distinguishing between spoken and written English ..." Similarly, Xie (2020, p.183) aimed to "diagnose linguistic problems in the English academic writing of university students in Hong Kong." Other causes of academic writing challenges have also been identified covering various factors or aspects. For example, Chokwe (2013, p.382) concludes that academic writing challenges include "the lack of proper teaching of reading and writing in schools, which creates a problem when students go to institutions of higher learning.".

Research method
Research design
This descriptive study employed a survey method which collected data from a pre-defined group of respondents in order to obtain insights on academic writing issues. The obtained data would then be used for improvements on further implementation of the topics (Burns, 2010). This survey aimed to pinpoint the setbacks and propose strategic solutions to overcoming the setbacks in academic writing.

Research setting and participants
This study was conducted in the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from February 2020 to November 2020. The

participants of this study were 26 undergraduate students who took the Academic Writing course in the English Language Education Study Program, Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. The survey participants were females and males in the fifth semester or the third year as undergraduate students majoring in English education. In general, the student participants belonged to a pre-advanced level and have studied English officially at school and Sanata Dharma University for approximately 10 years in total.

Research instruments and data gathering technique

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire that provided close-ended statements with the Likert Scale. There were two parts presented in the questionnaire. The first part addressed the difficulties or setbacks that the students experience in academic writing. There were 14 closed-ended questions with four degrees of agreement ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 means strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 agree and 4 strongly agree. At the end of the first part was one open-ended question in which the students were required to provide a short answer.

The second part addressed the solutions to the difficulties or setbacks that the students experience in academic writing. There were nine closed-ended questions with four degrees of agreement ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 means strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 agree and 4 strongly agree. At the end of the second part, there was one open-ended question in which the students were required to provide a short answer.

Data analysis

The research used descriptive analysis, which deals with data analysis and interpretation in the most unbiased way. There were five steps of the descriptive analysis technique implemented in this research. The first step was compiling and categorizing the data obtained from the questionnaire. The questionnaire, which was adapted from Mutimani (2016), had close-ended and open-ended sections on difficulties encountered by students in academic writing, and solutions to overcome the difficulties. There were 14 detailed difficulties listed, which were classified into four big difficulties, namely referencing, plagiarism, language usage, and structure of the academic essay. Meanwhile, nine solutions were listed in the second section of the questionnaire. After that, the researchers presented the quantitative data by using a table and numerical percentage from each statement and adding descriptive interpretations of the data in the table. Finally, the researchers organized the qualitative data from the open-ended section of the questionnaire and presented them descriptively.

Results and discussion
Academic writing difficulties/setbacks

This section presents the results of the questionnaire to answer the first research question. To find out the students' difficulties or setbacks that they experienced in academic writing, the researchers provided 14 items or statements (adapted from Mutimani, 2016) in the first part of the questionnaire requiring the participants to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement. The results of the setback categories can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' academic writing setbacks

No	Statement Categories	SD	D	A	SA
1	Parts of speech	0	12 (46.2%)	12 (46.2%)	2 (7.7%)

No	Statement Categories	SD	D	A	SA
2	Tenses	0	9 (34.6%)	11 (42.3%)	6 (23.1%)
3	Spelling	2 (7.7%)	13 (50%)	10 (38.5%)	1 (3.8%)
4	Prepositions	0	11 (42.3%)	15 (57.7%)	0
5	Writing sentences that follow a logical sequence	0	0	15 (57.7%)	11 (42.3%)
6	Vocabulary	3 (11.5%)	8 (30.8%)	12 (46.2%)	3 (11.5%)
7	Punctuation	3 (11.5%)	10 (38.5%)	9 (34.6%)	4 (15.4%)
8	Cohesion	2 (7.7%)	9 (34.6%)	13 (50%)	2 (7.7%)
9	Discourse markers	0	11 (42.3%)	13 (50%)	2 (7.7%)
10	Writing paragraphs with a clear focus	0	7 (26.9%)	15 (57.7%)	4 (15.4%)
11	Constructing clear and coherent academic essays	0	4 (15.4%)	13 (50%)	9 (34.6%)
12	Paraphrasing	1 (3.8%)	7 (26.9%)	15 (57.7%)	3 (11.5%)
13	In-text referencing	1 (3.8%)	9 (34.6%)	16 (61.5%)	0
14	Compiling a correct reference list	1 (3.8%)	8 (30.8%)	16 (61.5%)	1 (3.8%)

Notes: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

The survey results showed that there were three significant difficulties that the participants experienced in writing an academic piece of writing. Writing sentences that follow a logical sequence was the biggest setback claimed by all the study participants (100%, where 15 or 57.7% agreed and 11 or 42.3% strongly agreed). The students still faced difficulties in composing a good topic sentence which was followed by relevant supporting sentences and ended with a conclusion. The majority of the students still had only two or even one very long sentence as a paragraph.

The second biggest difficulty chosen by the students was constructing a clear and coherent academic essay. In total, 84.6% of the participants stated that they were struggling to do that. They became often confused with the definition of coherence, and thus had difficulty composing a coherent essay.

The third biggest difficulty that the majority of the students chose was writing paragraphs with a clear focus. As many as 73.1% of the respondents said that it was difficult to write a paragraph with a clear focus that was clearly distinguished from other paragraphs. There are many students whose paragraphs address the same issue. Therefore, their paragraphs were like a constant repetition which overlapped with one another. These findings were in line with Cai's (2013, p.5) statement: "Academic writing remains a prominent issue for students and teachers in Asian EFL contexts."

After those three biggest difficulties, there were also four other categories that most of the respondents chose to be the setbacks that they experience in academic writing. 69.2% of the

respondents claimed that they were struggling to paraphrase correctly. They still used the same sentence structure, and most of them only tried to find the synonym of the original sentence that they were trying to paraphrase. They still needed to be exposed to more exercises on the various ways to paraphrase.

Furthermore, using correct tenses also appeared to be the setback experienced by 65.4% of the students. They often stuck to one particular tense that they used at the beginning of their essay without looking at the context. If present tense was used to start their essay and there were parts in the following paragraphs that talked about past events, they still used the present tense.

The majority of the students (65.3%) also stated that they were having problems compiling a correct reference list based on the adopted referencing style of the university. The students often mixed one reference style with another referencing style. In some cases, they used a different referencing style from the type that was required by the lecturer. They often copied and pasted any reference that they could find from the writing that they used as a reference without checking the accuracy of the referencing style.

In addition, 61.5% of the students also claimed that they were unable to use in-text referencing such as citing and quoting sources well. They were often confused when they were asked to cite some work that was not originated from the usual source like a journal article or a book. For example, when the source was from an interview, they would still use the same format as if it was taken from a book. The last point was similar to that of Mutimani (2016, p.127), who concluded that "The majority of student essays were very weak in referencing, especially when acknowledging sources in-text but also in compiling a correct APA reference list."

The following five categories were chosen by most of the respondents, ranging from 53.9% to 57.7%: misusing some prepositions (57.7%), using inappropriate vocabulary items (57.7%), displaying no cohesion in the texts that they wrote (57.7%), using discourse markers such as linking words and connectors incorrectly in academic essays (57.7%), and using some of the parts of speech incorrectly (53.9%). Misusing punctuation marks seemed to be a problem that is only experienced by half of the respondents (50%). On the other hand, many students stated that they had no problems with spelling correctly, with a total of 11 students (42.3%) regarding it as a difficulty, whereas 10 (38.5%) agreed, and 1 (3.8%) strongly agreed.

At the end of the first part of the questionnaire addressing the difficulties in academic writing, one open-ended question was provided, and the students were asked to mention other difficulties that they encountered in writing their essays aside from the ones provided in the first 14 items or statements in the Google form. Four primary difficulties were identified in the responses to the open-ended question. The first difficulty that they experience is composing a good thesis statement for their essays. They also stated that it was difficult to elaborate the main idea into paragraphs. In addition, making an interesting title for their essays also seemed to be difficult for the students. The last difficulty mentioned by the students was finding appropriate sources for their essays.

Academic writing solutions

In this section, the results of the questionnaire to answer the second research question are presented. To solve students' difficulties or setbacks in academic writing, the researchers provided nine items or statements requiring the 26 respondents to indicate their degrees of agreement with each statement. The degrees of agreement range from 1 to 4, where 1 means strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 agree and 4 strongly agree. The respondents were also asked to respond to an open-ended question in item 10.
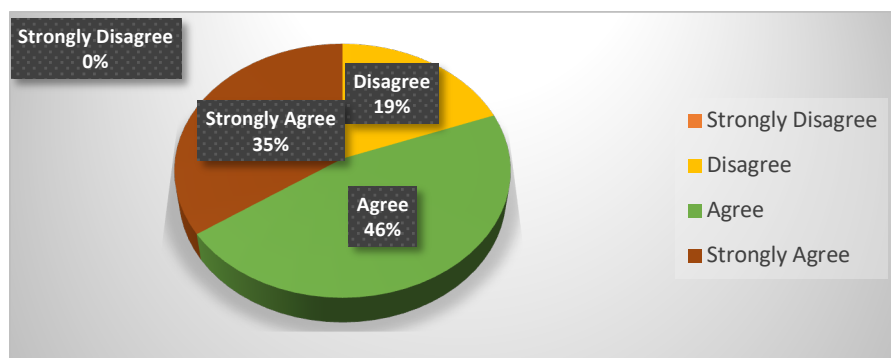
Figure 1. Training for lecturers

Based on the responses to item 1 in the second part of the questionnaire, 16 participants (61.5%) agreed, and 10 (38.5%) strongly agreed that academic writing lecturers should be trained and equipped with strategies to assist students in improving writing skills. This means that lecturers or instructors of academic writing need to update and readjust their teaching strategies regularly to facilitate their students better. Students often felt that the lecturers only used the same exercises and monotonous activities that did not motivate students in learning.
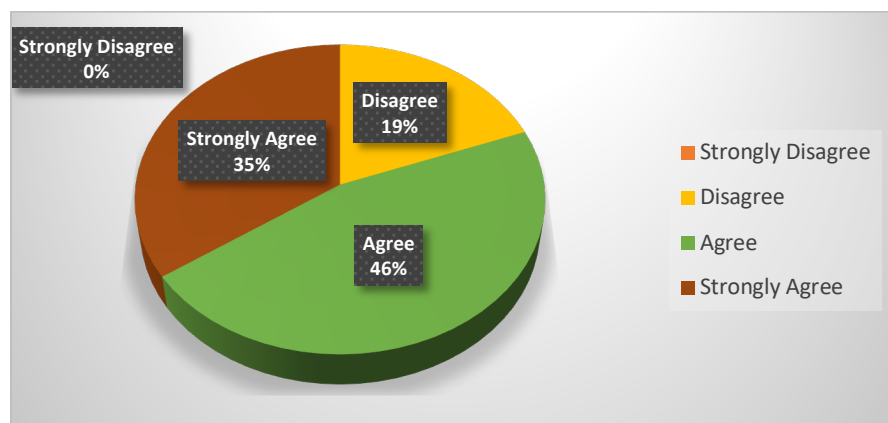
Figure 2. Writing unit introduction

Next, regarding item 2, most respondents, 12 of them (46.2%), agreed, and 9 (34.6%) strongly agreed that the lecturers needed to introduce a writing unit and enabled students to practise writing. These students were the students who needed to be guided from the beginning until the end. Nevertheless, five of them (19.2%) disagreed with their classmates, suggesting that it was unnecessary for the lecturers to give an introduction to a writing unit. The students who disagreed might be those who were already good at writing and who were autonomous. They would prefer to find introduction information and writing tips by themselves and require less writing practice.
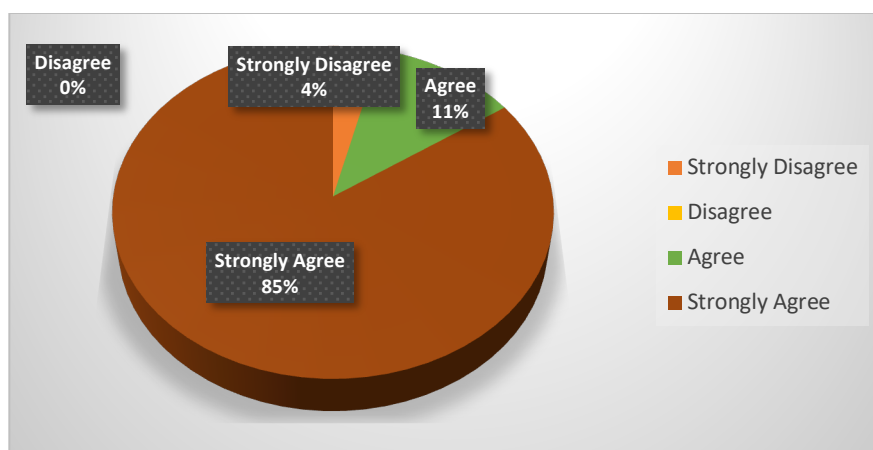
Figure 3. Providing feedback on strengths and weaknesses

In Figure 3, the majority (22 students or 84.6%) strongly agreed that feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their academic writing was vital. The students needed such specific feedback because the strengths or positive points may encourage them to become more confident and have feelings of achievement. The weaknesses of negative points would enable them to easily understand what to improve in academic writing. Interestingly, one student (3.8%) strongly disagreed with other fellow students; no specific feedback was necessary for this particular respondent. Possibly, general feedback would suffice for all students to revise their academic writing products, for example, argumentative essays. Huisman, Saab, Van Driel, and Van Den Broek (2018, p.956) say that peer feedback "triggers students to engage in problem detection, and can stimulate them to engage in problem diagnosis and subsequently contemplate solutions and suggest revisions."

Figure 4. Providing feedback in person

Further, Figure 4 shows that the students taking the Academic Writing course were divided into two categories, namely 19 of them (73.1%) who strongly agreed and 7 (26.9%) who agreed that they needed their lecturer's feedback given to them individually and in spoken form. If we compare Figure 3 and Figure 4, we notice that, respectively, around 85% and 73% of the students

strongly agreed they needed feedback to improve their academic writing. It means that as a whole, it would be invaluable for the lecturers to provide writing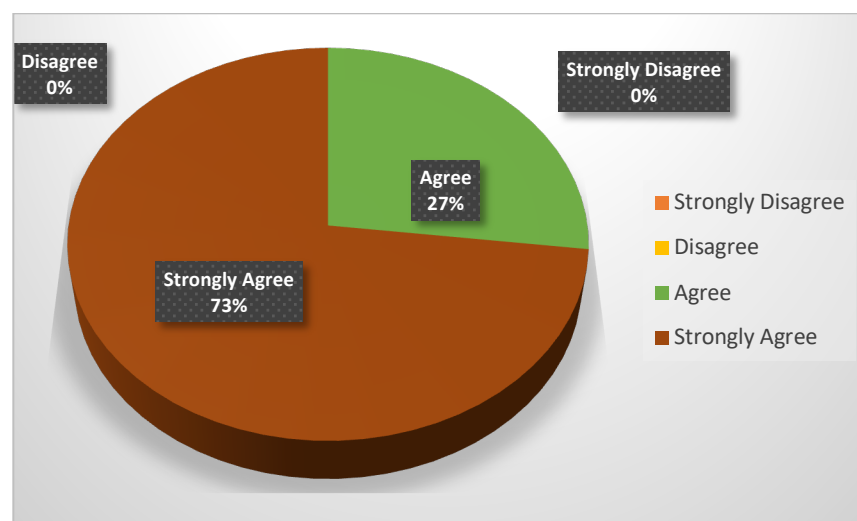 feedback to their students, both specific and general feedback. To some extent, such feedback providing is similar to that of Leyland (2020, p.212), who explored "advice-giving as an interactional practice …."
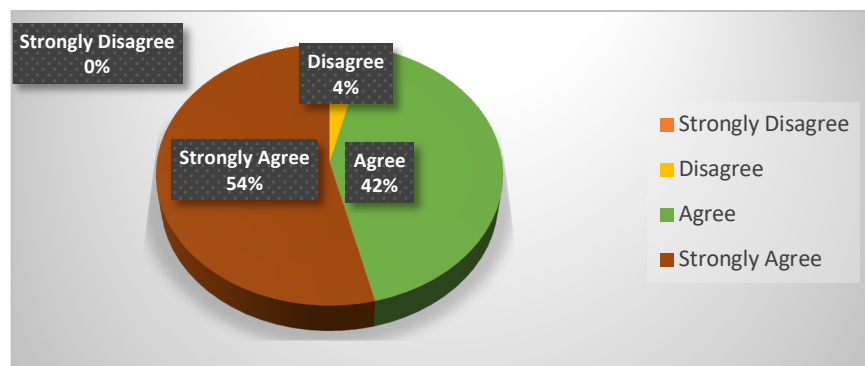

Figure 5. Improving the organization of ideas

Regarding their ability to organize ideas well in academic writing, the students agreed (42.3%) and strongly agreed (53.8%) that they needed to improve their capabilities in organizing ideas so that they would become more able to write academically, as shown in Figure 5. One student, however, disagreed with other students, stating that it was unnecessary to take further steps to improve the organization of ideas, implying that she/he faced no difficulty organizing ideas in academic writing. This aspect of academic writing should receive more attention, which is in line with that of Strobl, Ailhaud, Benetos, Devitt, Kruse, Proske, and Rapp (2019, p.33), who confirmed that "tools that support the development of writing strategies and encourage self-monitoring to improve macro-level text quality (e.g., argumentative structure, rhetorical moves) are infrequent."
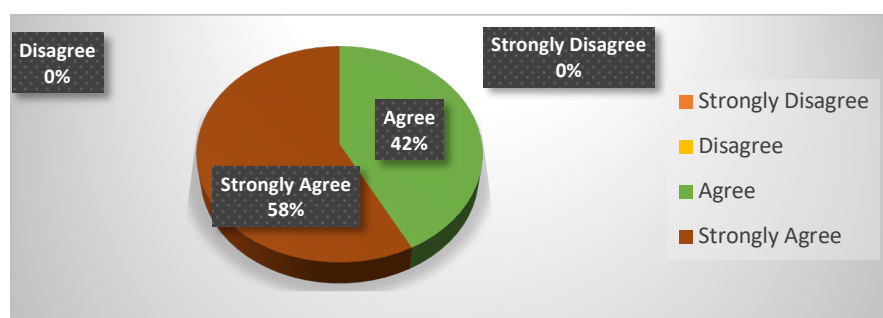
Figure 6. Improving language skills

Figure 6 shows that over half of the participants, 15 of them (57.7%) strongly agreed, and 11 (42.3%) agreed that they needed to solve their problems related to language skills and language elements, particularly in writing, reading, grammar, and vocabulary. As mentioned above, the students taking the survey responded that they faced setbacks or difficulties, for example, in cohesion, sentence structure, and diction or word choice. In academic writing, the students are required to write grammatically and semantically correct or acceptable sentences. To do so successfully, it is challenging for Indonesian EFL students of tertiary education, such as the

students taking the Academic Writing course at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. Bailey (2017) also discusses language issues faced by students in academic writing.
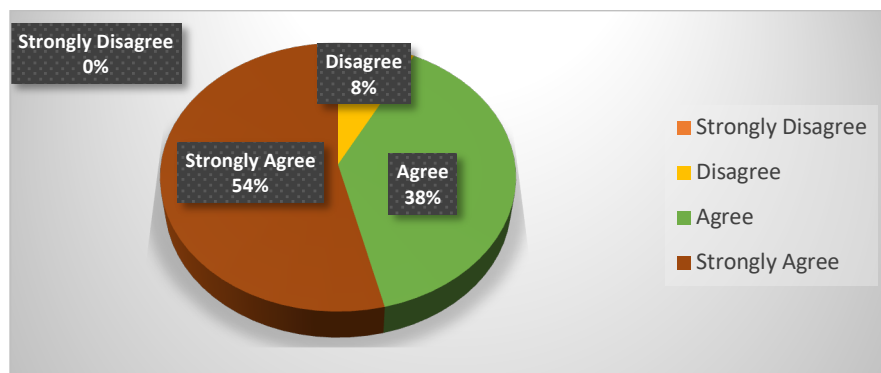
Figure 7. Improving critical thinking skills

Figure 7 shows that nearly 90% or 24 students said that their critical thinking skills needed to be improved so that they could write more critically in academic writing. However, two students (7.7%) expressed disagreements, and the two might have already had excellent thinking skills. To write academically, all students would be required to have abilities to think critically concerning a given writing topic.
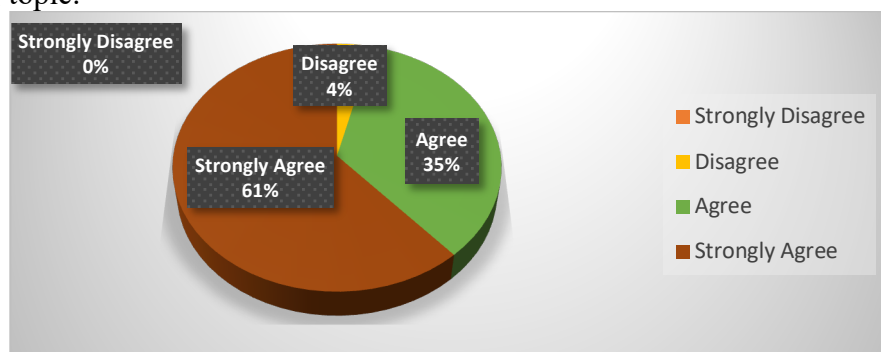
Figure 8. Improving paraphrasing skills

Next, as shown in Figure 8, the students stated that better paraphrasing skills would assist them in solving one of their difficulties in academic writing, mainly to avoid plagiarism. Based on Figure 8, in detail, 16 student participants (61.5%) strongly agreed, and 9 (34.6%) agreed that good paraphrasing skills would help the students to produce better academic writing products which are free from plagiarism. This situation may suggest that the students realized that plagiarism must be prevented and avoided. However, one of the 26 respondents responded that she/he had no difficulty paraphrasing what she/he read and needed to quote in academic writing. Norris (2016, p.72) states that "The most frequent plagiarizers are non-native English speakers writing in English. ... Paraphrasing (putting ideas in your words) is truly difficult, even for native speakers". Note that plagiarism is considered "a heinous crime within the academic community ..." (Pecorari, 2003, p.317).

Figure 9. Improving referencing skills

Referencing skills also needed to be improved as shown in Figure 9. As can be seen, 14 students (53.8%) strongly agreed, and 12 (46.2%) agreed that their setbacks in referencing correctly should be addressed so that they became capable of referencing in academic writing. In this context, the recommended referencing style was the American Psychological Association (APA), the sixth edition, because the Academic Writing course officially adopted the referencing style and required the studen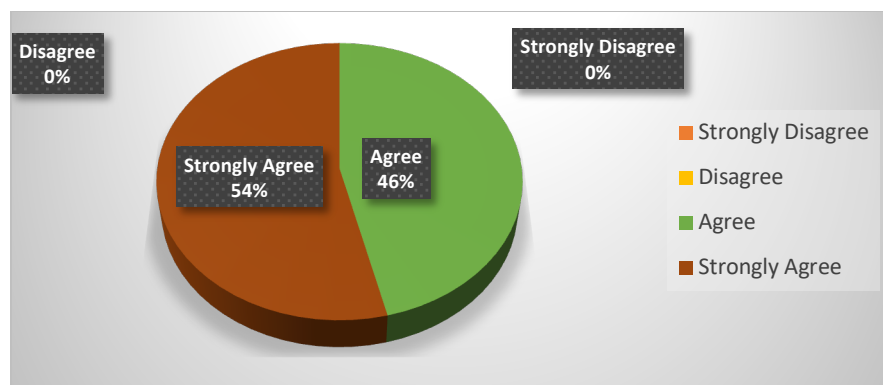ts to use it in their academic writing. Common issues in this respect may include problems in differentiating between journal articles and articles in conference proceedings.

Lastly, item or statement 10 in an open-ended form in the second part of the questionnaire asked the participants what other solutions they would suggest handling the difficulties in academic writing in addition to the solutions mentioned in items 1-9. In response, the participants said the following: giving students feedback after each class, providing information on how to develop essays, giving peer feedback so the students will not be shy to ask their friends for corrections, and brainstorming with other friends, for example. Other suggested solutions were allowing the students to write about topics they like, giving more attention to students with grammatical problems, teaching them step by step, and making writing a fun activity.

"The most common one is related to language use as well as coherence and cohesion. Others are related to writing [in their] own voice, finding relevant topics and sources, and the last and less problematic one is referencing and citations" (Al Badi, 2015, p.65). Interestingly, based on Singh (2015, p.19), "The most crucial solution employed to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices is being persistent and trying to express oneself in different ways." It is crucial then for the students to continue trying to find alternatives and practising writing academically.

Previously, Budjalemba and Listyani (2020, p.141) reported two factors contributing to academic writing problems, namely "self-motivation, self-confidence, lack of knowledge and feeling of under pressure", as internal factors. The external factors included "the teacher's teaching style, classroom atmosphere, materials, and writing aspects" (Budjalemba, & Listyani, 2020, p.141). Similar to the findings reported in Mutimani's (2016, p.70) research, which focused on academic writing challenges faced by Namibian undergraduate students, include the following 14 components: "parts of speech, tenses, spelling, prepositions, logic sentences, academic vocabulary, punctuation, cohesion, discourse markers, paragraphs, clear and coherent essays, paraphrasing, in-text referencing, and APA reference list". One of the proposed solutions from the respondents was "to train lecturers on ways that could improve students' academic writing" (Mutimani, 2016, p.86).

The results of this research would benefit EFL students to perform better in academic

writing since they could now identify academic writing setbacks or challenges (for example, parts of speech, discourse markers, and paraphrasing) and alternative solutions (for instance, improving language skills and improving paraphrasing skills). Lecturers of academic writing could also make use of the research results, namely the 14 writing setbacks in Table 1 and their solutions in order to facilitate the students to write academically better. Based on the results in Figures 1-4 in the section on *academic writing solutions*, it is essential that related department policymakers and academic writing lecturers themselves should ensure that all lecturers are well-trained, and provide sufficient exercises and various types of feedback.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the results of the survey, Indonesian tertiary education students faced setbacks or difficulties in academic writing, for example, the setbacks involving parts of speech, tenses, spelling, prepositions, vocabulary, punctuation, cohesion, discourse markers, writing paragraphs with a clear focus, constructing clear and coherent academic essays, paraphrasing, and in-text referencing. Regarding solutions to academic writing difficulties, the survey results showed that the following were implementable. Proposed solutions included giving peer feedback so the students will not be shy to ask their friends for corrections, having a personal consultation to help to write a good essay, reading more academic writing products, and providing a writing guide that is easy to understand.

The limitations of this study are the small number of participants consisting of 26 students and the absence of analysis of the writing products of the students taking the Academic Writing course. Consequently, no strong generalization could be drawn, or any detailed discussion about students' academic writing products could be provided in this study. Future studies of academic writing setbacks and solutions are, therefore, strongly encouraged to engage a larger number of participants and cover the analysis of academic writing products generated by students as learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly Indonesian tertiary education students.

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