CONTRACT LEARNING AS INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN ACADEMIC WRITING COURSES

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Article Info	Abstract
	The use of contract learning is essential to involve students actively in the classroom activities and to facilitate teachers' control and flexibility in the teaching and learning process, while letting students to work on activities independently. Therefore, this research is aimed at 1) revealing out whether or not contract learning instruction has a significant difference in the students' academic writing performance; 2) describing to what extent the contract learning promotes students' learning and autonomy; and 3) elaborating how the students perceive the diagnostic and feedback phases of individualized strategy as embedded in the contract learning. This study is mixed method interventional research design because the data are obtained from quantitative and qualitative. The participants of the study was the year 3 students of English Department at Mandalika University of Education consisting of 21 students. The instruments used in collecting the data are diagnostic test of academic writing performance, contract form, and questionnaires. The quantitative data are analyzed through the inferential paired t-test. Meanwhile, the qualitative data of each individual's response to each item on the questionnaire are broken down according to the responses to each question, and the responses are compared, contrasted, and explored to find patterns and themes. The results revealed that 1) contract learning has affected positively students' learning and performance in academic writing, 2) contract learning brings positive improvement on academic writing performance and 3) positive perception towards the application of contract learning was shown by the students as it provided self-study materials and multiple types of feedback from the the lecturer. This implies that students may benefit from multiple types of feedback and that instructors' expertise in effective feedback delivery is of paramount importance.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is among the most important skills the second/foreign language students to master. Not only will the skill assist students to gain better grades and help them communicate their ideas effectively, but also it facilitates them to get better future work and opportunities (e.g., as a journalist, researcher, or academic). However, being able to write academically precisely is often considered difficult or even awkward by many students (Harmer, 2007). It is because academic writing is a complex activity involving some stages of task completion, requires advanced knowledge of grammatical structures, and demands on extra skills such as paraphrasing and citation skills. The current approach to teaching, learning and assessing writing, particularly EFL context, mostly focuses on grammatical errors, while neglecting other aspects of writing such as organization, mechanics and contents (Lee, 2008).

The research challenges the efficacy of contract learning for enhancing tertiary students' achievement in academic writing. Contract learning is defined as "simply written

agreement between teacher and learner in which the learner undertakes to complete mutually agreed upon tasks in specified amount of time on his or her own initiative" (Greenwood, 2003). The purpose of using contract learning is to involve student actively in the classroom activities and to facilitate more teacher control and flexibility in the teaching and learning process, while letting students to work on activities independently (Swartz et al., 2019; Brewer et al., 2007).

Despites the promise of contract learning to improve students learning (Zandi, et al., 2015), there is very limited numbers of research investigating the efficacy of this strategy in EFL writing contexts. In addition, regarding to the fact that the current teaching and learning practice in writing topic is still traditional and teacher-oriented, new innovation which involves learners to regulate their own learning while also receive continuous constructive feedback from their teacher is urgently needed (Shukur and Raji, 2021). This research was set to help students to be independent learners and subsequently improve their academic writing performance. The impact of this strategy on student performance in academic writing was measured by observing the differences of students' performance before and after the implementation contract learning instruction. The research is also keen to explore students' experience of use of contract learning to promote their autonomous learning skill and perceived benefits for students.

This study was guided by the some research questions; is there a significant difference in the students' academic writing performance before and after contract learning instruction? to what extent has the contract learning promotes student learning and autonomy? and how do the students perceive the diagnostic and feedback phases of individualized strategy as embedded in the contract learning?

Contract learning as individualized instruction

Contract learnings have been used rather extensively in higher education to promote self-study and autonomous learning (e.g., Anderson, Boud, & Sampson, 2013; Gardner & Miller, 1999). Several studies have shown that such contracts can help learners pursue relevant goals (Brewer, Williams, & Sher, 2007), take more responsibility, and become highly motivated (Stephenson & Laycock, 2002). Contract learnings thus provide a platform for students and teachers to discuss how to meet the curriculum requirements. The gap between their current knowledge and ability and the desired capacity can be identified via a diagnostic test. Then realistic and negotiated learning goals and deadlines can be agreed upon so that students can develop an understanding of their responsibilities and those of their teachers. A student's responsibility may include self-study, pair-work, group learning, while a teacher's responsibility may involve monitoring student progress and providing one-on-one tutorial sessions. The agreement between the teacher and student is recorded in a contract that is signed and honored by both parties. Although contract learnings are not a panacea to meet all the requirements of a well-balanced class, they do provide a means of individualizing teaching and measurement to a degree not offered by other teaching and testing methods (Davidson, 1986).

Previous studies of use of contract learning

Despite promising efficacy to enhance learning, the research towards the use of contract learning to improve learning remains limited. A research study conducted by Bailey and Touhy (2009) explored health students' experience of using contract learning as a method of assessment. The study found that students' approach to assessment strategy influenced engagement with contract learning and identified three types of learners (happy, pragmatic and fearful) and reported that support, relevant skill, prior to experiential learning, and theoretical knowledge are some factors among others influencing successful completion of contract learning. Lemieux (2001) used contract learning as a tool for empowerment and

accountability involving 100 students enrolled in the graduate-level courses. Participants of the study completed a brief instrument that measuring key concepts of empowerment. Students felt they had decision-making power and reported a sense of personal responsibility for their learning experience. They also demonstrated significant improvement in performance after revising their assignments. The findings suggest that contract learning is considered an effective tool for responsibly sharing power and promoting better performance outcomes.

A few studies have examined the use of contract learning in ESL contexts. Davidson (1986) used contract learning in an ESL writing class. He identified 33 categories of sentence level errors committed by 74 students in four ESL writing classes. A reexamination of his findings showed that few errors could be regarded as common among the participant students—59% of the errors were common among only less than 13% of students and only 10% of errors were common among about 77% of students. Thus, teaching grammar to the whole class was not an efficient way of addressing the issue. This highly individualized nature of errors led Davidson to conclude that contract learning could be used to address the long-standing problem of sentence-level errors in ESL writing, without changing the focus of the class from writing to grammar. He reported that of an average of 5.5 learning goals contracted for each participant, an average of three goals were achieved by the end of the study. Davidson (1986) also suggests that contract learning be considered as self-criterion-referenced assessment, where the progress of an individual in comparison to himself is measured; thus, the measurement is ipsative. Self-criterion-referenced assessment could be used as one of the bases for decision making along with criterion- and norm-referenced measures. This type of multiple referencing helps the accuracy of the judgments about the progress of learners. However, it should be acknowledged that the different assessment information can carry mutually exclusive information, thereby creating a need to present the information from different sources in a score report document that enables decision makers to use the full range of information

Moon (2004) studied the impact of contract learning on students in an EAP writing course. The findings from this case study resembled those of Davidson (1986); that is, there was a wide range of needs, the majority of which were mutually exclusive. Moon resorted to contract learning to facilitate addressing students' specific needs based on degree, nature, and urgency of the needs. She also suggested that a thorough introduction to contract learning is necessary to initiate positive attitudes and learner motivation. Furthermore, motivation needs to be sustained by teachers providing ongoing support, especially by teachers interacting with students throughout the contract period so that a trusting relationship can be established. Teachers should thus assume a more directive role especially at the initial stages of the contract learning because they have a better understanding of the procedures and the objectives of the course.

The more recent study by Zandi, et al (2015) with a sample from Iranian undergraduate students, focusing on contract learning and its efficacy on improving student grammar knowledge, provides scientific evidence of student improvement in their grammatical knowledge after using contract learning. The authors argue that contract learning has beneficial influence on student behavior of learning in way that promotes their learning autonomy. Although the efficacy of contract learning is evidence in this study (Zandi, et al., 2015), it has an issue on sampling strategy by which sample was recruited voluntarily and represent those who have high motivation to learn grammar. We still do not know how contract learning affects those with lower level of motivation. Thus, there is a lack of evidence the extent to which the improvement of students' grammatical understanding was caused exclusively by contract learning. There may be other facilitating variables on learners' learning. The proposed study used a convenient sampling strategy to recruit participants so it

captures diverse students' personal background which may impact on their academic writing performance.

RESEARCH METHOD
Design of the study
This research employs mixed method interventional research. Particularly, it employs an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. According to Creswell (2012) exploratory sequential mixed method consists of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data with the former data is gathered at the first phase, followed by collecting the latter data to further explain the quantitative results. Justification for selecting this design is that using multiple data allows data triangulation to take place which guarantees the rigor and trustworthiness of the data and results. Quantitative data in this study are in form of score gained from diagnostic pre-test and posttest of academic writing. Meanwhile, qualitative data are the data gained from open ended questionnaire that ask student participants about their experience, comments, perception of the contract learning and its application to learn academic writing subject.

Participants
Participants were selected conveniently from year three students of English department at Universitas Pendidikan Mandalika (UNDIKMA) Mataram. Year three students are selected under consideration that academic writing subject, which is the subject of concern in this research, is offered for this cohort of students.The population of the students in this cohort approximately 150 students, distributed in 4 parallel classes.Around 40 students in each class. However, due to practicality reason, the study conveniently selectedoneclass of student as participants consisting of 21 students in this study: academic writing class in which principal researcher of this study is the coordinator of the subject.

Instrumentations
Three instruments were used in the present study including a diagnostic academic writing test, a contract form, and a questionnaire. The diagnostic test assessed students' academic performance in four aspects of academic writing including 'content, organization, rhetorical discourse, grammar/mechanics' (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 61), plus their ability in paraphrasing and quotation skills. A contract form was prepared to provide feedback and organize the learning process. It included a summary profile of the weaknesses and strengths of the student; a description of the responsibility of the teacher and the student; goals and deadlines for the first feedback session; dates of the follow up meetings, and a study guideline. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to the participant students. To prepare the questionnaire, the researchers conducted an open-ended interview with each pilot participant regarding the test itself, the feedback procedures, and contract learning form.

Procedures of the research
The following is step-by-step procedure of conducting the proposed project, including 9 steps. The following procedures are adapted from Zandi, et al (2015) for the purpose of maintaining appropriateness. These procedures were applied for academic writing subject. The followings are the procedures used to collect data for academic writing class namely 1) Developing diagnostic pre-test instrumentation; 2) Developing diagnostic pre-test instrumentation; 3) Diagnostic test (pre-test; 4) Detailed and specific feedback to students; 5) Signing contract learning form; 6) Signing contract learning form; 7) Self-study; 8) One-on-one meeting with researchers; 8) Post-test; 9) Detailed and immediate feedback to students; 10) Administering questionnaire

Pilot study of the contract learning

The pilot study starts from administering pre-test, serving diagnostic purposes to indicate where students are in their learnings- search for their weaknesses and strengths. The pilot study of the pedagogical intervention via contract learning was conducted with 20 students selective randomly from year 2 of English students at UNDIKMA. Their test papers were assessed and a diagnostic map for each of the participant was manually generated. The map provides the following information: (a) the ability level of the participants, (b) errors they have produced in their written work, (c) areas for improvement, and (d) constructive descriptive feedbacks for improvement.

To make the interpretation of the map more accessible, a spreadsheet was used in which the codes of the errors are categorized on the basis of grammatical forms. During a one on-one meeting with the researchers, every participant receives the map and a coded spreadsheet that help identify the major weaknesses. The researchers then explain the logic of the map and walk the participants through their profile. After that, the researcher and the pilot participants discuss the examinee's strengths and weaknesses in relation to their academic writing performance.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures in the Main Study

A similar procedure of data collection in the pilot study was repeated in the main study. For the analysis of the data and for answering the first research questions about the difference of students score in pretest and posttest after the application of the contract learning, the inferential paired t-test was employed. This statistical analysis answered the questions about the efficacy of contract learning in improving students' academic writing performance, through measuring and calculating the effect size.

For the qualitative data, each individual's response to each item on the questionnaire was broken down according to the responses to each question, and the responses are compared, contrasted, and explored to find patterns and themes. After the initial reading of the data, some themes emerged. A categorical strategy was used to break down and rearrange narrative data to allow comparisons between similarities and differences of opinions expressed by the participants. Then another round of thematic analysis wasconducted that leads to an initial interpretation of the data. Afterward, to ensure the quality of the analysis, a peer debriefing technique (Teddlie &Tashakkori, 2009) was used in which the questionnaire data, the initial analysis, interpretation, wereforwarded to the experts and knowledgeable person about the topic to ensure the interpretative rigor of the study. This is also intended to check on the reliability of the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Difference in the performance before and after contract learning instruction

To answer the first research questions about the development of participants' academic writing performance, the analysis of the quantitative data gathered through pre- and posttest was done alongside the analysis of the qualitative data reflected in participants' self-assessment report. To make verification on the participants' learning progress, the level of students' improvement in academic writing test was measured individually. This is in line with the principles of self-reported criterion referenced assessment in which ipsative comparison is made, instead of comparison among participants. In contract learning classes, this is possible to do as each student share different profiles and needs with regards to the writing performance

After that, subtraction was made on the number of errors in pre-test from that of post-test and then divided by the errors in the pre-test to calculate the progress rate. The resulting value was expressed in terms of percentages (for example, participant #318 did not repeat 77% of the errors in pretest). Then, the pre-test data were made individual for purpose of

calculating each participant scores based on merely the item in which they failed. Likewise, the posttest scores of individuals were individualized so that they showed the improvement rate which were indicated in the pre-test. The analysis indicated that the error categories students have made has been identified in each student contracts, with more than 50% of errors observed were shared among all of research subject.

This finding suggested that there was a whole class additional remedial tutorial for these students.In addition, about more than one-third of the teaching material in this study were considered lack of relevance with respect to the students' learning needs. Regarding diverse needs of participant on learning materials, the use of contract learning as individualized strategy gain relevance in this context of study. To make sure that students' improvement of academic writing in posttest was statistically significant, researchers conducted inferential statistics analysis with a paired t test method. Prior to do this test, statistical assumptions were tested. The normality assumption was measured using Kolmogorov-Smirnov Zpretest for both scores (pre and post-test) resulted in favorable assumption (Zpretest = 0.65, Ppretest = .70; Zposttest = .87, Pposttest = .30). The paired t-test revealed a 63% rate of improvement in the scores between pre-test and post-and this was proved significant statistically (t = 6.786, df = 23, p = .00) with enormous effect size of r = .89. The findings indicates that it is meaningful and important. This finding is in line with Lewis (2004) who found that learning contracts was significantly improve the students' achievement. Students with contract learning posseed high self -motivated to learn (Frank and Scharff, 2013). The implementation of learning contract is one of one of the effective methods to promote a succesful learning (Noviyanti, 2021)

The extent the contract learning has promoted learning

This study does not intend to claim that it revealed all important variables that significantly influence or affect positively students' learning and performance in academic writing nor strongly suggest the casual relationship between contract learning and academic writing performance. The findings presented here just indicate the potential roles of both internal and external drives, such as teacher feedback, learning motivation, and self-regulation of learning, to promote learning.

It is often argued that to promote effective learning, students must know the target of their learning, make comparison between their current level understanding and the learning standards/targets, and proceed task that close the earning gaps (Sadler,1989; Chandra, 2015; Assauri et al., 2022). Feedback by teachers and learners' self-monitoring play the main rolein this process, and the goal of education should be to assist them to become progressively moreindependent from teacher feedback and more reliant on self-monitoring.With regards to the use of contract learning as a strategy approach, most of the respondents in this study (15 of 21) expressed favorable opinions regarding adoption of contract learning in the instructional process. It is likely that some factors such as awareness to their own weaknesses as well as eagerness to advance their academic writing abilities. Learning contracts provide opportunity to promote student commitment to and seriousness about the learning event (Aly, 2006; Gaiptman & Anthony, 2016). Furthermore, the individualized support they had from lecturers on one-on-one meeting format appeared to contribute positively to advancement of their writing skills. Learning contract is able to help the students learn better and faster and decrease the their misbehavior (Sumiarsih, 2009; Whicombe, 2016).

However, it is not clear from this study which factor(s) among others had more significant contribution of increasing student writing performance. It can be a plausible argument if it placed one-on-one meeting with instructors and feedback they received might become influential to increase their engagement with the completion of the learning contract. Consequently, this brings positive improvement on performance in the post test. Learning Contract is a strategy to increase potential s of the students such as value acknowlegment ,

learning motivation, learning confidence, learning responsibility, learning authority, and learning satisfaction (Lewis, 2004; Heath, 2016). Students were more self-directed and engaged following the use of learning contracts (Delaney, 2011; Vitton & Buts, 2014). Frank and Scharff (2013) also argued that learning contract is an instrument to enhance students commitment, boost academic performance, and encourage self direction.

Students' perception of the question items and diagnostic feedback
The findings of this study regarding the impact of contract learning on academic writing skills suggested that participants writing skills have been improved and most of them had a good impression with their performance. Brewer et al. (2007) revealed that learning contract is effective in raising the students awareness of the learning outcomes and what is required in their planning to achieve the outcome. To evaluate students' thinking about the assessment process, questions regarding thediagnostic test and feedback were proposed and students' comments on these were critically analyzed. A synthesis of their comments showed that 15 of 21 students appeared to show a favorable impression of the item formats on the test (pre- and post-test). In their comments about the whole test, majority of participants thought that the diagnostic test is considered as a "good" test for keeping up motivation to study and diagnostic function for the learning weakness and strengths.

One of the principal features of contract learning is the availability of a wide range of opportunity. It provides for personalized and dedicated one-on-one meeting with the teacher (Fadli et al., 2022; Fatiani et al., 2021; Chandra, 2015). In fact, 14 of 21 participants, who had responded to the questionabout feedback, had a positive opinion and experience about the meetings and asserted the meetings were encouraging. More than half of the participants (13 of 21) were reporting a satisfaction with the feedback procedure and process during themeetings. Students mentioned effectiveness, detail, and individualized nature are some reasons revealed during the analysis. Four participants contended that the feedback sessions and frequency of one-on-one meetings should become even more extended and interactive. This is to support differentiation as different individuals might have a variety of preferences in terms of amount timing and type of feedback. These findings are in support with the finding from the questionnaire.

Participants had been asked to mention the main reasons that cause them making errors/slips on theposttest. They reported that carelessness, lack of attention, and sometimes time limitation inherent to the test were the most cited reasons. Participants were also asked the make comparison of the effectiveness between two types of feedback provided - one of which is the general and delayed feedback after the pretest and the other one is that an immediate and detailed feedback after the posttest. Six of ten participants considered the second one more beneficial and advantageous to learning. However, they did not make a sharp demarcation regarding these types of feedback and believed that both types of feedback are important and beneficial in different ways. This finding is in line with Fadli et al. (2022) who informed that general feedback sometimes has a positive effect in enhancing students' metalinguistic in writing classes. In this study, general feedback in the form of detail elaboration dealing with the students' writing performance helps students to know more the writing processes in composing a complete paragraph (Kazemian et al., 2021; Haerazi & Kazemian, 2021).

In sum, it seems that most participants expressed favorable perspectives regarding the procedures adopted to generate a customized diagnostic profile, the method of feedback deliveries, meetings with the tutors, and the self-study material. The use of learning contract are able to enhance the students independency, self-directed, confidence, and self motivated to learn (Sajadi et al., 2017; Gaiptman & Anthony, 2016). Furthermore, the findings indicate that participants were unique and had different preferred learning needs and conditions which requires different types of feedback. This implies that students may benefit from multiple

types of feedback and instructors' expertise in effective feedback delivery is of paramount importance.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that contract learning has significant influence or affect positively students' learning and performance in academic writing nor strongly suggest the casual relationship between contract learning and academic writing performance. The findings presented here just indicate the potential roles of both internal and external drives, such as teacher feedback, learning motivation, and self-regulation of learning, to promote learning. It is likely that most participants expressed favorable perspectives regarding the procedures adopted to generate a customized diagnostic profile, the method of feedback deliveries, meetings with the tutors, and the self-study material. Furthermore, the findings indicate that participants were unique and had different preferred learning needs and conditions which requires different types of feedback from teachers. This implies that students may benefit from multiple types of feedback and that instructors' expertise in effective feedback delivery is of paramount importance.

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