Students' writing strategies in accomplishing final exams: lessons learned from an Islamic higher education institution

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ABSTRACT

This present study aims to describe tertiary students' writing strategies and their response in accomplishing final exam. Grounded in a qualitative approach by using case study as the research design, 27 undergraduate students of an Islamic higher education institution volunteered to participate. Data were collected through semi-structured interview and documentation. The data were analyzed by reducing and transforming the data, then drawing conclusion. The study findings showed that the undergraduate students employed two types of writing strategies, i.e., free writing and brainstorming. There were 20 students using free writing strategy, and seven of them using brainstorming strategy. Most of them shared their positive responses in using the writing strategies, such as the feeling of happy and comfortable in accomplishing final exam. They narrated that using free writing strategy was very helpful to write an article journal better and more structured. On the contrary, there were also some EFL students who showed negative responses, e.g., the feeling of dizzy, lazy, and difficult to draft their ideas. This study recommends some empirical insights on how university teachers and faculty members manage final exams to accelerate students' writing strategies.

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Introduction

Writing is one of skill to communicate with other people using written language in form of the paper, field note, etc. As one of those four skills, writing is one of skills that students need to master since it is important in some aspects of life (Klimova, 2013). As Raimes (2011) said that writing is important to express and develop the idea into written form. It means that when the writer wants to write something they must know how express their ideas into the field note, paper, etc. Writing becomes one of activity to develop the mind of people (Stockall & Cole, 2016). A writer must do some processes before they write something, such as prewriting, planning, draft writing, and revising (Chien, 2012; Guo & Huang, 2020).

Students know that writing is the way how to produce a written product. It is a process of transforming ideas coherently into written text. This becomes one of human activity in their life. People also have the habit became a hobby to always write something that occur in their life (Dwiagustini et al., 2021). Nowadays, especially for students they can write anything not just about the lesson in their class because in this era many people write more than talk. It can be said, writing is one a way to express ideas, feeling, and experience in certain time and situation thought written form which had grammatical rule (Yang, 2014). Furthermore, writing was used to show writer had mastered particular grammatical rule, good idea about the subject matter. Writing students do not need to pay attention to the grammatical rule in their writing, they just focus on the content of the writing that they want to develop (Cekiso et al., 2016).

In any case, students from English Education Department at the university level has lesson of writing from first semester until third semester. That is why, mastering writing in English should be provided for the students as early as possible since they are in elementary school (Philippakos, 2020). A study conducted by Muhammad (2010) showed that the students' writing at the university level was not good enough. They did not have an ability to organize ideas and sentences into good paragraphs. Sometimes, the students did not have ideas to discuss in their writing or may lack information related to the topics. This became a crucial problem since they had to write their final thesis in the last semester of their education by themselves.

Learning English is important thing especially for students in English Education Department. In this phenomenon and based on the experience of researchers, students have difficulty in writing, especially when doing assignments in writing course (Elmahida et al., 2021). It happened because there are many things, materials, or ideas that have not been understood so that it is difficult to create a result in writing (Syahid, 2019). Moreover, it is also because some students still have lack of vocabulary. As stated by Schmitt in Rokhuma (2017), students need to acquire around 3000 to understand and create a text considering vocabulary knowledge is one of important factor in language learning. There are still many reasons why writing English is difficult.

One of problems in writing experienced by some students is because in writing we need to make clear the sources and ideas (Baker, 2014). Based on the pre-interview 1 conducted to the students in class A of English language study program, a public university in Surakarta, Central Java that was hold on November 13th 2021, most of them explained that they are confused, misunderstanding, difficult to start, and did not know the steps of having composition in writing academic writing.

 This becomes problematic among students. Many reasons are experienced during the process of doing assignments, so the author takes the topic of the implementation of writing techniques in accomplishing final exam. The researchers want to know how students use writing techniques because before deciding to use techniques in doing final exams, there are many difficulties and reasons that students explain, this will be explained by the researcher.

Students of English Education Department, especially those who are in the third semester, class A, are encouraged to make a final exam of writing with free theme. Students have a time of 2 weeks to complete the final exam. The lesson is academic writing, which is a higher level than the previous course. Oshima and Hogue (2007, p. 3) stated that "academic

writing is different from creative writing, which is the kind of writing you do when you write stories". In this condition, in pandemic era COVID-19 during the learning process carried out online class, so that the level of understanding of students is very different from offline class. These conditions based on the researcher experiences, that the concept of the learning system is clearer when offline class, as students we can better understand the learning process while offline than online, although this depends on each student. The researchers have conducted for two times pre-interview in class A students of English Education Department in third semester of a public university in Surakarta, Central Java.

The researcher has conducted for two times pre-interview in class A students of English Education Department in third semester of a public university in Surakarta, Central Java. Pre-interview 1 was hold on November 13th 2021. Based on the pre-interview 1, the researcher asked some questions to students of English Education Department in 3rd semester class A. This pre- interview by using WhatsApp groups, this interview to all students in class A.

The researchers found that students difficult to doing the final examination of writing. Students have some obstacles before they make a journal. They said that students need more times to doing the final exam, still confused to start, confused to what things must be prepared, felt lazy to do, need references and hard to find the ideas to make a title or topic, many tasks at the same time, so it is difficult to focus on just on task, etc. Therefore, based on the pre-interview 1 above, the researchers know the obstacles before the students in class A doing the final exam.

Pre-interview 1 was hold on November 13th 2021. Based on the pre-interview 1, the researcher asked some questions to students of English Education Department in 3rd semester class A. The pre- interview was hold by using WhatsApp groups. They said that they felt lazy when they will start to write; confused about what to look for and prepare; confused about looking for references and ideas for a title; it's hard to focus because there are many other tasks at the same time; confused about where to start it, etc. It is not just one of the students, but the most students give same answered. The students before on going to make journal have some difficulties, they don't know to start in doing the final exam, and that explanation are the answer of how is students felt before doing the final exam". Based on the pre-interview 1, the researcher found the obstacles when students start to write the final exam.

Pre- interview 2 was held on November 15th 2021. Based on this pre-interview 2, the researcher asked some questions to students of English Education Department. The researchers found that students would use certain technique for doing the final exam because there are many obstacles before. By using techniques, they hope that it can help them in doing their final exam, so that the writing they will produce is more focused. Moreover, it is also easier to know what to look for and develop, easier when applying the material to be discussed, and with the hope that the results will later students get good grades. In addition, using technique in accomplishing final exam students can also help the students to know the rules in making a journal better.

The rationale triggers deeper investigation on the issue of writing strategies. Therefore, the present study aims to explore undergraduate EFL students' writing strategies and their response in accomplishing final exam.

Method

In this research, the researchers use qualitative approach. This study focuses on the analysis or interpretation types of the writing technique, the implementation of writing technique, and the students' response in using writing technique to accomplishing final exam.

The researcher tries to analyze the result of the interview and documentation. The researchers just collect the data, make description and finally make conclusion. The data will cover the documentation of the students in using writing technique and interview using google form to answer some questions related to the topic. Furthermore, it is the study in which the researcher needs to collect and describe the data to get a conclusion (Ary, 2010). It is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the opinions from the students (Moleong, 2017).

The subjects of this research are the third semester students of English Education Department in a public university in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. The researcher chose twenty-seven students in class A in third semester, which consists of twenty-five girls and two boys.

Findings and discussion

Students' use of writing strategies in accomplishing final papers

In this research, the researcher found the data from interview and documentation. The data description consists of the data from interview in the student's writing technique in accomplishing final exam, and also the data from documentation to the process of implement the technique in accomplishing final exam. This research focused on what is the writing technique used by the students, how is the implementation of writing technique used by the students, and how is the students' response in using writing technique to accomplishing final exam. The research finding was taken from the phenomena that happened during the students of English Education Department in third semester when they accomplishing final exam from the beginning to the end. They are twenty-seven students consists of twenty-five girls and two boys.

Students of English Education Department in Class A have some techniques in accomplishing final exam. In this class students used 2 types of writing techniques, consists of free writing technique and brainstorming technique. Most of the students also used free writing technique. Students who used free writing technique there are 20 students, and students who used brainstorming technique there are 7 seven. It can be concluded that the most students in class A used free writing technique, and a little students used brainstorming technique in accomplishing final exam.

Brown (2000) stated that free writing is a technique to generate ideas; it should be used as a beginning, as an initial exploration of the ideas that you have about the topic. It is also can be a useful technique in order to help learners start to write because if frees the learners to write whatever they want to (Broadman & Jia, 2008). The most students used this technique because it is freer what they want to write. Students can freely write everything in their mind to develop their ideas or discuss about something, so became easy to write the writer's opinion.

Oshima and Hogue (2009) said that students use free writing when they write something to gather ideas. They added "the more you free write about the topic, the more ideas and better ideas you will have" (p. 28). From the explanation, we know that the reason of why students used free writing technique is that because they can write something with their own language. Because free writing is categorized into a simple technique, there is not many rules, and easy to use (Tussupbekove, 2015). Oshima and Hogue (2007) when you free write, you write "freely" without stopping on a topic for a specific amount of time, you just write down sentences as sentences are correct or not. He added that in the purpose of free writing is to generate as many ideas as possible and to write them down without worrying about appropriateness, grammar, spelling, logic, or organization.

Besides, there were seven students used brainstorming technique in accomplishing their final exam. Brainstorming means that write all kinds of ideas whether it is good or bad based on the topic given in a sort of time and do some organizing later (Octavia, 2018). Here, students are required to write down their idea that seems related to the topic whether is that valid or usable. When students can't find anything to add to the list, read and specify what is important that must be included and what must be deleted (Zemach & Carlos, 2006).

Students who used brainstorming technique can help them think about and develop a topic then getting words on paper. Using brainstorming can make students to start with general ideas and find many details information about the ideas (Anggraini, 2020; Nurlaili, 2018). This technique is called structured technique. It can help them to develop their ideas, to make easy when make a journal because before doing the final exam students write some points related with the topic (Ahmed, 2019). Therefore, it can make easier when they want to explain the points that they chose. In other word, using this technique can make students work on a more structured in final exam (Zemach & Carlos, 2006).

Oshima and Hogue (2007) stated that academic writing, as the name implies, is the kind of writing that you are required to do in college or university. It differs from other kinds of writing such as personal, literary, journalistic, or business writing. Its differences can be explained in the part by its special audience, tone, and purpose. Therefore, students must pay attention when doing the task when using the writing technique with the purpose to help them accomplishing in their final exam (Donald, 2008). Most of the students in this class using free writing technique. The result of interview using google form, concluded that there are twenty students use free writing technique, and seventh students use brainstorming technique.

Alqhatani (2015) states that in the process of implement the techniques, every student has different way according to the techniques that they used. In this research, students had the process before they make a journal in their final exam, this process is according to their techniques that they used. Oshima and Hogue (2007) mentions that the procedure/steps when using the free writing technique, there are five steps/procedures: write the topic at the top of your paper; write as much as you can about the topic until you run out of ideas; include such supporting items as facts, details, and examples that come into your mind about the subject; after you have run out of ideas; reread your paper and circle the main ideas that you would like to develop; take that main idea and free write again (Ritter & Mostert, 2018).

Students who used free writing technique before make a journal they make a list in paper about the topic, idea, and some point which is to make a journal, and then they just write

down the order of how to make a journal on paper and the rules related to the assignments, read some sources or references and to make it students immediately type in Microsoft word in their own language. In this step before students used free writing technique, they only write the general point not specific points they write the that points to help them when make a journal, to remember what things must to write with directly used their own language, not only the points but also students write the rules to make a journal, so when they understand the rules, students can write with their own language directly (Brizee & Tadriff, 2010). It is slightly different with the theory, because in the theory the implement free writing technique an example is direct writing in the form of free writing, but here students first write points and rules before making a new journal, then they write a journal with free writing technique.

Oshima and Hogue (2008) mentioned that there are four procedures of brainstorming technique. It includes: write down the general topic at the top of your paper; then make a list of every idea that comes into your mind about the topic; keep the ideas flowing, try to stay on the general topic, however, if you write down information that is completely of the topic, do not worry about it because you can cross it out later; use words, phrases, or sentences, and do not worry about spelling or grammar; now rewrite your list and group similar ideas together. Cross out items that don't belong or that are duplications.

Students who used brainstorming technique, find the references, read it and then make a brainstorm about the general point which given a little explanation (Muhib et al., 2014). The points written were only basic points becoming the main discussion when making a journal. In this step, students used brainstorming technique by writing the important points, which are going to describe in their journal (Oshima, 2010). This technique can help students to understand more about what they write, what topics will be discussed more deeply, so that it can help students to not misunderstand the content being studied in journals according to the references that they used (Subkhan, 2016). In the theory used brainstorming technique by writing down all the important points or big points that will be discussed in their writing, but in implementation students write down the points along with an outline explanation, so it becomes easier to understand the essence of the points to be discussed.

From the explanation above, based on the interview and the documentation, the students explain how the writing technique that they used in accomplishing final exam according to what they understand. Students used the selected writing technique in accordance with what they understand as much as they can and implemented properly in accomplishing final exam (Langan, 2008).

Students' response to writing strategies in accomplishing final exam

Response is one of action of people to do something. John H. Harvey in Ahmadi (2009, p. 54) stated that the response is "response as one of the main functions of the soul can be interpreted as a memory image of observation, has stopped, just in impression". Therefore, most of the students have many different characteristics in responding writing technique to accomplishing final exam (Hacker, 2012). There are 24 students who give positive response in using writing technique to accomplishing final exam, and there are three students who gives negative response in using writing technique to accomplishing final exam.

Students gives positive response with an explanation that using technique to work on the final exam has added value because it can help make assignments easier, more structured,

and how to do them better (Harmer, 2007). Many students say that they are happy to be able to use the technique; they chose to make a journal, so with the chosen technique they know that should be developed (Li, 2007). Using writing techniques, the results of the writing are better and well organized because according to them writing techniques are very important to use (Hidayah, 2014). The responses given by students are different but in essence they are happy to be able to used writing techniques to do the final exam.

Students who give negative response, they think that the tasks are hard, it is difficult to make a journal, confused to choose technique that they didn't understand about the writing technique, felt dizzy; lazy; running out the ideas, the deadline is tight, students felt stress because they have other tasks at the same time (Hwang, 2010). However, from the research findings above, most of students give positive response related with using writing technique to accomplishing final exam in the third semester students of English Education Department in IAIN Surakarta. The students were happy and felt good in using writing technique with enjoy and felt comfortable in making a journal to complete the final exam.

Writing techniques especially free writing and brainstorming techniques become major techniques used by the students in accomplishing their final projects (Blanchard & Root, 2003). They also give the positive response in implementing these two writing techniques. It can be interpreted that to start writing and organizing ideas, students need guidance and direction in composing a writing work (Fitzpatrick, 2005). As explained by Oshima and Hogue (2007), they explained that writing outline should has four steps, 1) think the topic, 2) organizing the ideas, 3) writing, and 4) revising and editing. By using particular techniques will contribute to students writing and the process is more effective and ease (Mehrali, 2015).

Conclusion

Based on the research that was carried out, it can be concluded that some of the students use free writing technique, and some of them use brainstorming technique. The process of implementing the technique in each student is different. Students have different process both before doing the final exam and in doing the final exam according to the techniques they used. Students using free writing technique in doing the final exam make a list in paper about the topic and some points related to the topic or everything required to make a journal and directly type in Microsoft Word about the topic to be discussed in their own language. On the other hand, students using brainstorming techniques should find the references at the beginning, make a brainstorming of the topic, and write down the general description. In the case of students' response, most of the students give positive response in using free writing technique to accomplishing final exam. There are 24 students who give positive response towards using writing technique to accomplishing final exam, and 3 of them give negative response toward the use of writing technique in completing their final exam.

Acknowledgements

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