



“Writing is challenging”: factors contributing to undergraduate students’ difficulties in writing English essays

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ABSTRACT

Essay writing is one of writing skills that must be mastered by students especially college ones because they often get an assignment to write an essay. However, many students find it difficult when they are assigned to compose an essay. This research aims to investigate the difficulties in English essay writing and its factors. Framed in a narrative inquiry, 33 students and one lecturer volunteered to participate. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke. Study findings reveal that students find difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, and developing topic ideas. Factors that contribute to students’ difficulties are both internal factors (psychological factors and linguistic factors) and external factors (peer support and advisor support). Several ways that students do to overcome the difficulties in writing essays were motivating themselves, studying and reading a lot, and writing practice. In addition, they were also asked their friends and their lecturer to get more explanation. To make a good essay, students need to improve their grammar and punctuation ability. They, likewise, need to increase their logical thinking ability to create coherent and cohesive essays.

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Introduction

In learning English, there are four skills that students must master including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In academics, the main purpose of education is to increase students’ writing skills (Al Khazraji, 2019; Saddler et al., 2004). Writing has become the most difficult skill because we need to consider the grammatical rules (Ma, 2021). Norris (2016) stated that students could arrange words easily and compose sentence structure properly if they have good grammatical knowledge.

Essay writing is one of writing skills that must be mastered by students especially for college ones because they often get an assignment to write it. One of the reasons why students should master essay writing is to show their abilities, (Geyte, 2013). Fitzgerald (1994) adds three reasons why essays are an essential part of learning process. First, essays can help students improve their understanding and promote students to think critically. Second, it develops students' writing skills, especially in compiling arguments. Last, it can help teachers provide appropriate feedback based on students' abilities.

In the English department of an Islamic university in Pekalongan, Central Java, Indonesia, students were taught some writing skills in the English essay writing course. In this course, teachers give materials about essays and how to arrange them. In addition, teachers also guide and direct students to write essays well. Then, students are assigned to practice writing essays, either individually or in groups. Furthermore, students are also asked to present their work by explaining each part of the essay. Eventually, the teacher provides feedback on the results of student presentations. That is why students become familiar with essays.

In fact, many students still find it difficult when they are asked to write an essay even after they have passed the English essay course with good scores. On the pre-interviews, they admit that they cannot make an essay well. Meanwhile, based on the learning outcomes, they should have mastered the essay well. Learning outcomes are evidence that someone has learned something that makes them understand what they did not understand before (Hamalik, 2014). In addition, Susanto (2015) said that learning outcomes are abilities achieved by students after participating in the learning process. In other words, their scores prove that they can understand essay writing well.

Based on the previous study from Khaerunnisa (2019) entitled English Language Education Department Student's Challenges in Writing Essay, it is known that ELED students have some challenges in writing an essay; grammar, vocabulary mastery, formal language use, and challenging to find topic ideas. Furthermore, Budjalemba and Listiyani (2020), in their study entitled Factors Contributing to Students' Difficulties in Academic Writing Class: Student's Perceptions, stated that there are two factors that cause students difficulty in academic writing; internal factors and external factors. Internal factors are self-motivation, lack of knowledge, feeling under pressure, and self-confidence. Meanwhile, the external factors are teachers' strategies in learning, writing aspect, material, and classroom atmosphere.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher is interested in conducting a closer investigation on this issue using narrative inquiry to get more detailed information. This research focuses on the factors that cause undergraduate EFL students' difficulty in writing essays. Therefore, this study framed into (1) What are the difficulties faced by students in writing English essays? (2) What are the factors affecting students' difficulties in writing English essays? (3) How do students and lecturer overcome the difficulties in writing English essays?

Method

This study used qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry as a research design. Narrative qualitative used in this study was to explore the EFL student's experience during their learning process in the English essay writing course and what difficulties they faced in writing

an essay as well as its contributing factors. According to the purpose, the narrative inquiry seems to be the most suitable approach because it provides a detailed story about a person's life experience (Ary et al., 2010). This research was overtaken in an Islamic university in Pekalongan, Central Java, Indonesia. This research involved 33 students majoring in English Education Department in the seventh semester and one lecturer. The selected students are students who have passed the English essay writing course and got B and B+ on their final scores.

The data collection technique used in this study was open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Open-ended questionnaires use to get detailed information from the students. Students are allowed to respond spontaneously. Then, they can answer using their own words (Popping, 2015). For the lecturer, the researcher conducted an interview. It aims to get more open and broad problems, where the interviewees are asked to express their opinions and ideas (Sugiyono, 2016). In this interview, the researcher can ask questions outside of the list of questions according to the answers from the interviewees.

After conducting open-ended questionnaires and interview, researcher used thematic analysis as a data analysis technique. Thematic analysis is one of the qualitative data analyses that aim to find the theme of the data studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are six steps in thematic analysis, i.e., getting familiar with our data, assigning preliminary codes to describe the content, finding themes in code across different interviews, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Findings and discussion

Students' barriers in writing English essays

Essay writing becomes the most difficult skills in writing. That is why students often find difficulties in writing English essays. Those difficulties are influenced by some factors. To describe the factors that affect students' difficulties in writing essays, the researcher uses theory by Brown (2007). According to Brown, there are two factors affected student's difficulties in writing, namely internal factors and external factors. The internal factors involved psychological factors, linguistic factors, and socio-cultural factors. While external factors involved peer support, advisor support, and family support.

According to questionnaires, the researcher finds that there are four issues in writing English essays namely vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and coherence, and developing topic ideas. Students often find difficulties in compiling essays because they have lack of vocabulary mastery. Like ZI: "vocabulary, especially in terms of word choice, which must be adapted to the context, while my vocabulary mastery is not much" (ZI, Open-ended questionnaire, 25th December 2021). NM added that, "regarding vocabulary, the vocabulary used in daily life with essay writing sometimes has differences. This requires thoroughness skills and the skills of the author to continue to review and increase vocabulary" (NM, Open-ended questionnaire, 24th December 2021). Therefore, it makes them difficult in composing an essay. Viera (2017) stated that learners with no appropriate and sufficient knowledge of vocabulary will not be able to express their own feelings, especially in writing.

Literally, vocabulary is the basis in the second and foreign language acquisition. In addition, students need to use formal language in essay writing to make a good impression

on the readers. It will help reduce confusion and improve clarity. When writing, a good vocabulary is an indispensable. Students need to avoid vague words because it does not give the readers a good sense of the meaning. Also, use strong verbs that give the reader good information. Thus, students need to have sufficient vocabulary knowledge to be able to write well. When students write essays, they need to determine the right vocabulary according to the context of the essay. Norris (2016) argued that vocabulary mastery can help students to achieve both reading and writing skills. By mastering vocabulary, the students could look at the sample of structured sentences, and perhaps it can help them to improve their sentence knowledge to write an essay. Further, it will help them to improve the quality of the essay.

Besides, students also need to have satisfactory grammar knowledge to make a good essay, but many students admit that they cannot use correct grammar. SM said, "it's definitely the grammar part because I'm still afraid of being wrong and confused in adjusting the grammar that I have to use when writing" (SM, Open-ended questionnaire, 22nd December 2021). In addition, TA said, "In grammar, I sometimes find it difficult to compose good and correct sentences because I have not mastered grammar well" (TA, Questionnaire, 25th December 2021). From the statements mentioned, the lack of knowledge of English grammar and unfamiliar words are assumed to be a deficiency of students to grasp the overall message conveyed in the sentence forms.

Moreover, the lecturer also said, "the main difficulty of students of course on grammar. I often encounter students' grammar which is still messy" (Lecturer, Online interview, 22th December 2021). It is declared that grammar has become the most difficult thing in writing an English essay. Writing English can easier if we know the use of clauses, verbs, adjectives, nouns, and adverbs. To write a text, for instance, we need to understand the rules of sentence structure. When learning a foreign language, grammar becomes one of the most difficult aspects of language to learn (Byrd, 2003). As a result, students find it difficult to understand grammar and often misunderstand the use of proper grammar when composing sentences. Proper grammar is necessary for credibility, readability, communication, and clarity. Grammar plays an important role (Goh, 2007) because it analyzes the way the sentences work in writing. Further, writing is one of the skills which is used by people to communicate in paper form (Mickan, 2001). Therefore, most of students had less ability in structure and grammar mastery it was seen made the mistake in the content and comprehension in writing an essay.

In addition, cohesion and coherence also become the difficulties in writing essays because cohesion and coherence have important roles to make good essays. As DA said, "cohesion and coherence. What is certain is that there must be a match between one paragraph and another, so that's what makes it difficult for me (the meaning of each paragraph)" (DA, Open-ended questionnaire, 19th December 2021). Most of students confused about using a proper transition signal in their essays. They only know the meaning of each transition signal without understanding how to use it properly in every sentence in their essay writing. At last, their essay writing seemed like not coherent and cohesive because they used improper transition signal.

Additionally, students feel difficult to maintain coherence and cohesion in essay writing because a lot of students frequently ignored the spelling and punctuation. They think that spelling and punctuation are not important, when those elements are one of the crucial elements in writing and it influences the meaning of writing. Yule (2008) defines cohesion as a tie and connection that exist within the text. While coherence is everything fitting together

well and it is not something that exist in words or structures, but something that exist in people. In other words, cohesion and coherence become important aspects in an essay where they become a link between paragraphs. In addition, the use of appropriate cohesion and coherence can make it easier for readers to understand the essay. Without cohesion, the reader will not understand the main points that the writer is trying to make and it also hampers readability.

To make a good essay, students need to explore and develop their ideas, but they often stuck in writing an essay. HD said, "I get confused to start in determining the topic and developing the topic because I am confused about how to start" (HD, Questionnaire, 26th December 2021). While Morgan (2016) stated that students must consider to the audience or reader of their essays and the purpose of the essay. They are mostly fear to make failure in how they express their idea, feeling, and experience in the writing. Therefore, students are required to read a lot because it is a source of the information and pleasant activity (Rahmany, et al., 2013). It means people simultaneously read a source of information and get information and knowledge. In other words, by reading many sources of information will add students references and knowledges that will help students to make an essay. In addition, students can develop an idea by supporting it, discussing its significance, and showing how it connects to the rest of their essays and thesis statement. If they can do all three of these things consistently, they will find themselves writing strong, well-developed paragraphs and papers.

Factors contributing to student's difficulties in writing English essays

There are two factors the researcher found in this study. Those are internal factors and external factors. The internal factors involved psychological factors and linguistic factors. Psychological factors consist of self-esteem, self-efficacy, anxiety, and motivation. Based on the data, motivation has a great influence as some of the participants said that, "there are no demands, either from within or from outside. Especially the demands on ourself to make an essay" (BS, Open-ended questionnaire, 23rd December 2021). Meanwhile, MK: "the main factor is because I am lazy and lack of intention. Especially I'm lazy to read so my knowledge is little" (MK, Open-ended questionnaire, 23rd December 2021).

Without motivation, students cannot work well because motivation reflects in students' choices of learning tasks, the time and effort, their persistence on learning tasks, and in coping with the obstacles they encounter in learning process (Bakar, 2014). In addition, students feel anxiety because they scared to make mistakes. They are not confident on their abilities to make a good essay. Therefore, it makes their writing skills are not developed.

The second internal factor is the linguistic factor namely student's knowledge of the correct grammar structure. The participants said, "the difficulty factor is that I do not master grammar well, so I often find it difficult to determine grammar" (AR, Open-ended questionnaire, 21st December 2021). CM narrated that "lack of mastery of material and grammar, so I often find it difficult when writing essays" (CM, Open-ended questionnaire, 22nd December 2021). While Basalama et al. (2019) argue that to make a good essay, students need to master the grammatical rules and their immediacy in writing. Then, mastering grammar will allow the students as a writer to make their work clearer and readable, they also have the freedom of making stylistic choices. Additionally, the lack of motivation makes students not compelled to delve deeper into grammar. Thus, many students have low

grammar skills and affect their ability to write essay writing. They often find it difficult to use grammar and make mistakes in grammatical structures that affect essay content.

Besides, the external factors affected students' difficulties are peer support and advisor support. Friends greatly affect students in making essay writing. RR said:

Yes, it affects. Usually, students ask their friends in doing assignments. If we ask a friend who can be said to be good at writing essays and then they teach us well, then maybe our ability to write essays will get better. But on the other hand, if friends can't, then I'm in quite a bit of trouble (RR, Open-ended questionnaire, 22nd December 2021).

The interview vignette proves that the peers have an essential role in developing student engagement (Estell & Pardue, 2013). In other words, the role of a friend is crucial in learning. Friendship which gives positive influence will result to motivation among the persons or students while negative friendship will give bad influence and become an obstacle in writing essays. Friends are often used as a support for their peers in doing and achieving something. In addition, students are more comfortable working together with their friends in doing something because the environment can stimulate students for some reasons, they have motivation to finish their work (Burhanuddin, 2020).

Advisor support also has a role in students' essay writing, especially on the way of teaching, guiding, and giving feedback to students. According to RL:

The method used is correct, students can understand well how to make a good essay from the lecturer's explanation, then students are asked to make an essay to applying student understanding in making essays, but its application is less efficient, resulting in essays being made (RL, Open-ended questionnaire, 21st December 2021).

Informed in the interview excerpt, the implementation of the lecturer's strategy is an aspect that causes students difficulties. Applications that are less efficient can lower students' motivation to learn, so it affects the process of student acceptance of the learning material. In addition, many students also assume that the success and failure of students do not entirely depend on the lecturer, but also on the ability of students to capture the material. Therefore, teachers need to understand the condition of their students to make it easier for them to determine learning strategies, so teachers have an effective way in teaching and make the students are easily understood the materials.

Efforts of the students and lecturer to mitigate the difficulties

There are some ways that students have done to overcome their difficulties in writing English essays. First, students motivate themselves to learn. As NF said:

By learning more and motivating myself to be more enthusiastic in writing essays. Then, make an essay with a topic or theme that I like and use simple and easy-to-understand sentences (NF, Open-ended questionnaire, 23rd December 2021).

Likewise, HE said "motivate myself, re-learn about essays and read a lot to increase vocabulary" (HE, Open-ended Questionnaire, 27th December 2021). Motivation can influence what, when, and how we learn (Pintrinch, 2008). In other words, if students possess motivation in learning either intrinsic or extrinsic, they can decide what to study, how much time to spend, and the method used to understand the essay easily. If they have a strong motivation to master essays, they will not easily give up studying it. They will learn and practice to be able to write a good essay. In motivating themselves to write, they usually do

some ways, such as take breaks, reward themselves after writing, practice freewriting, and conquer their writing anxiety.

Second, students read a lot of references. According to RK on questionnaires on 23rd December 2021:

Only one key for me to overcome this difficulty, namely by reading other books and journals. Then, don't forget to make a good hook/phrase/anecdote in the background (in the first paragraph) so that readers are interested (RK, Open-ended questionnaire, 23rd December 2021).

That statement is supported by RW on questionnaires on 21st December who said, "read more about topics, both journals and websites as well as YouTube" (RW, Open-ended Questionnaire, 26th December 2021). Most of them read reference of essay examples to help their understanding of the essay. As Palani (2012) stated that effective reading is the most important avenue of effective learning. Reading a lot of references can be the strategy to overcome the challenges in lack of grammar and vocabulary mastery and problem in formal language use. Through reading, the students could overcome their problem in writing essay. In addition, a lot of reading such as novels, journals, or articles can also improve students' literacy skills because they indirectly learn about how to write by analyze the structure in a paragraph and know how to select a diction. Then, it helps students increase sentence knowledge and helps students to get inspired to write.

Third, students do some practice to increase their writing skills. As DA said, "by continuing to learn and practice. Without learning and practice, it is difficult for us to develop" (DA, Questionnaire, 19th December 2021). In addition, DR said, "re-learn about essays and practice a lot to get used to it, because actually you can because you used to" (DR, Questionnaire, 26th December 2021). Practice is one way to test our abilities. Practice is nothing more than a repetitive behavior and if the students are practicing something wrong, it will become a habit making it difficult to change. Especially writing, we need a lot of practice to develop skills and sharpen the mind to be able to string words well. With a lot of practice, students will get abundance experience from the essays that have been made. They can analyze and correct mistakes to develop their skills in order to improve their writing skills. Meanwhile, CM: "practice and find out what went wrong with my essay understanding. Then make an essay based on facts so it's easy to find vocab" (CM, Questionnaire, 23rd December 2021). It is in line with Dorfman (1996) who said that an essential additional skill is the ability to gain and utilize knowledge from practice.

The last way used by students to overcome the difficulties is asking their friends and their lecturer to get more explanation about something they did not understand. Friends and lecturer have an important role in the process of making essays. Friends and lecturer can be an alternative for students to get better understanding of essays. Through intense explanations from lecturers and friends, it can improve students' understanding. The participants said:

I asked for opinions and suggestions from friends, then after that I just consulted with the lecturer. In addition, by understanding in advance what topic I will write about so that I can write an essay easily (TA, Open-ended questionnaire, 25th December 2021).

It means that peer and teacher help them to develop their English essay writing, especially peer support. Some students need more detailed explanation. However, sometimes, they are shy to ask about the lessons which had been explained by the teachers,

so students chose to ask their friends who understand about the lessons more. Most of students are more comfortable to asking and discussing their work with their friends in making essays, such as asking each other opinions on essay they made, what to add and removed on their essays, etc. It makes it easier for them to make an essay. Besides, students can ask the lecturer's help to check their essays, so students know the errors of their essays. Therefore, the lecturer will help the students to revise the essays to reach a good essay.

To overcome students' difficulties in writing essays, the lecturer said:

At the time of learning, if they have difficulty, of course I will give help. But after the lecture is over because we don't meet again, it's difficult to help, unless they come to me for asking help, of course I will help (Lecturer, Online interview, 22nd December 2021).

The lecturers always provide opportunities for students to ask questions. However, students are often shy to ask questions, as said by ML in the questionnaire on 22nd December 2021, "yes, lecturers always ask whether students have difficulty. It's just that most of the students are reluctant to convey their difficulties (ML, Open-ended questionnaire, 22nd December 2021)."

As result, they have difficult in understanding the essays well. Therefore, it is important for lecturers to understand their students well. As Klug et al. (2013) argued that diagnosing the learning behavior of the students is the important role teachers should carry out. However, the large number of students is an obstacle for lecturers to understand their students one by one. Therefore, it makes the lecturer can only explain the material as clearly as possible and wait for the students to ask if there is any material they do not understand. It helps the lecturer understand what the students need. Further, the lecturer will do her best to help the students in making essay, such as help the students to brainstorm the best topics for their essays, give suggestions, and give feedback to students' essays.

Based on the problem above, the lecturer also stated that students need to improve their grammar and punctuation skills. In addition, they also need to improve their logical thinking skills to be able to make cohesive and coherent essays. The lecturer believes that if students have good logical thinking ability, they will be able to make an essay more coherent and cohesive because they can analyze and connect each word and sentences appropriately.

Conclusion

The findings show that there are some difficulties faced by students in writing English essay. First, students find difficult in vocabularies. Lack of mastery of vocabulary makes students often confused and difficult to find and determine the right words to use. Second, students' grammar skills are still low. Grammar is the most difficult aspect as the main problem for students. They find it difficult to determine the correct grammar, such as the use of tenses. Third, the students encounter the issues of cohesion and coherence. They do not master the use of proper conjunctions and have difficulty connecting meaning between paragraphs. So that making essays is often ambiguous and difficult to understand. Last, they have trouble in developing ideas. It is due to the lack of mastery of the material. They are often stuck and do not have an idea to write an essay.

All difficulties faced by students are derived from several factors including internal and external ones. The first internal factor is the psychological factor. Motivation is the biggest

thing behind it. Students have very low learning motivation, so they are lazy to study and practice writing essays. They need interest and support to do something. The second internal factor is the linguistic factor, namely grammar as the main problem for students. Students need to improve their grammar skills to make good essays. In addition, there are two external factors. The first external factor is peer support. Friends have an important role in the process of making student essays. They can have a positive influence on motivating students as well as a negative influence on making students lazy. Then, the second external factor is advisor support. The lecturer's way of teaching and the media used are the inhibiting factors for students.

On the other hand, students have their own way to overcome their difficulties in writing essays. Formerly, they try to motivate themselves to learn and increase the writing practice. Then, they search for and read essay references on the internet. In addition, they asked lecturers and friends to strengthen their understanding. Moreover, lecturers are also always willing to help students when they have difficulties. The lecturer added that students need to improve their grammar, punctuation, logical thinking skills and understanding of their cohesion and coherence to create good essays.

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