Writing effectively for English academic essays: an exploration of tertiary students’ challenges

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ABSTRACT
This study explores EFL students’ challenges in writing an academic essay in their academic writing class. The participants of the study were ten EFL students, especially students from Bengkayang Regency, West Kalimantan, in the Academic Writing classes at the English Language Education Program, a private university in the academic year of 2020-2021. A semi-structured interview was used as the instrument of data collection to achieve the research goal. The data analysis indicated that the writing challenges were mainly related to developing writing ideas, writing sentences with correct grammar, finding references to support their writing, writing the end-text references of their paper, and understanding the feedback from their lecturer. This study concludes with some empirical evidence that students’ challenges in writing an academic essay are quite influential for their performance to produce good quality in writing an academic essay. This study hopes to provide practical ideas for teachers to help their students enhance their academic essay writing.

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Introduction
Academic writing is one of the core subjects that undergraduate students in an English Language Education Program should learn. It is the foundation to support students’ self-development (Al-Mukdad, 2019; Nenotek et al., 2022; Noori, 2020) and to learn other disciplines where English is the language of instruction (Alharbi, 2019). Moreover, French (2018) stated that learning academic writing is essential for learners to build a solid foundation to think and write critically in academic discourse. However, at the same time, academic writing is also considered one of the most challenging skills for university students whose first language is not English (Akhtar et al., 2020; Fernsten & Reda, 2011; French, 2018; Tso & Chung, 2016). It is because students have to engage in various writing activities, such as brainstorming ideas, planning, sketching conceptual frameworks, writing drafts,
correcting, and revising (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018; Pablo & Lasaten, 2018). Moreover, it is a type of writing that is considerably different from other types of writing (e.g., creative writing) (Esfandiari et al., 2022).

A similar problem also occurs in an academic writing class at the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Salatiga (PBI-UKSW). Students seem to have difficulties when trying to write and organize their academic essay paper, a classroom assignment they need to complete to pass the course. As a result, some students fail the class, cannot take a research proposal class the following semester and have to delay their graduation time.

The study should benefit EFL lecturers teaching a similar academic writing class to know and be more aware of their students’ writing challenges. The lecturers can use that knowledge and awareness to adjust their writing instructions or classroom activities so that the students can complete their writing tasks with minimum challenges. The results of this research might also provide ideas for teachers to develop learning activities, materials, and teaching methods to help their students write an academic essay.

Academic writing is more than using correct tenses and verb forms; it is also about maintaining a formal tone and style in writing (Mumtaz, 2021). Besides that, academic writing is a writing style used in formal essays, papers, and analysis papers/essays (Sari et al., 2019). Academic writing is one of the writing courses that have an advanced level than other writing courses (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). Fatimah (2018) also mentioned that academic writing in the English Education Department is a compulsory subject offered in semester five.

More specifically, Aryanti and Fitriana (2017) said that an essay is a product of academic writing where a writer should combine factual data and compare it to existing experts’ theories. In the context of this study, the students write an academic essay that has the following characteristics. First, the essay is an argumentative one. It is a writing genre requiring the students to investigate a topic, collect, generate, and evaluate evidence, and establish a position on the topic concisely (Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2022, n.p). An argumentative essay is also a scientific paper that contains arguments, explanations, proofs, or reasons (Abbas & Herdi, 2018). Generally, an argumentative essay also has an objective review of information followed by examples, analogies, and cause-and-effect relationships (Marni et al., 2019; Vögelin et al., 2019).

Then the next is an argumentative essay usually has five paragraphs: introduction (in the first paragraph), body (in the second-fourth paragraph), and closing (in the last paragraph) (Nenotek et al., 2022). The introduction part introduces the topic of the essay, explains an issue, and outlines how the writer intends to handle it; moreover, it contains a thesis statement that tells readers what to expect in the essay (Trung & Hoa, 2017). Then, the arguments presented in the body of the essay should be supported by references taken from articles from academic journals or websites. The references also should be written following the APA 7 edition. Meanwhile, the conclusion is written to signal the end of the essay, summarize the main points, and leave the final thoughts of the writer to the readers (Toba et al., 2019).

Literature reported various challenges that EFL students might face when writing their academic essays. For example, Ratnawati et al. (2018) found that 61% of students in academic classes faced difficulties in language problems in academic writing, difficulties in
constructing sentences, connecting ideas, and organizing the academic text (Mulyono & Artarini, 2021). More recently, Budjalemba and Listyani (2020) found two factors that caused the challenges in writing an academic essay. They are internal factors (i.e., self-motivation, self-confidence, lack of knowledge, and feeling under pressure) and external factors (i.e., the teacher’s teaching style, classroom atmosphere, materials, and writing aspects). Similarly, Jat et al. (2020) also mentioned that students face many psychological problems and challenges, including a lack of self-confidence and motivation and writing anxiety. Besides that, Rohayati and Rustandi (2021) also mentioned that the students feel it is difficult to express their ideas and structure their arguments in their essays. Other challenges include a lack of variety of ideas, poor sentence structure, and a lack of supporting references to support arguments (Pablo & Lasaten, 2018).

Furthermore, Jezhny and Bapir (2021) concluded that challenges regarding academic writing experienced by the students were related to the use of articles, punctuation, prepositions, irregular verbs, poor expressions, consistency in paralleled structure, and usage of verb tense. Budjalemba and Listyani (2020) also confirmed that grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling as linguistic aspects are included as factors that cause students’ challenges in writing their academic essays. Similarly, Mumtaz (2021) found that students’ inability to use appropriate vocabulary makes students face difficulty expressing themselves in their own words, and often their work looks incomplete. It is shown that a lack of some linguistic aspects will affect students’ performance in writing. Further, some students feel confused and unsatisfied with the teachers’ feedback on their work (Fareed et al., 2016). Some teachers may not give clear feedback to students; for example, the teachers just give marks on students’ work without comments and corrections from teachers. Giving more detailed and explicit feedback is easier for helping students to find out how they are supposed to correct their mistakes and learn how to write better in their work, especially in a second/foreign language (Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2015). The researcher would explore if participants of this study experienced the same challenges in writing an academic essay or texts as those reported by the previous studies. Meanwhile, there is still a need of further study that could explore students’ challenges in writing an academic essay, especially students with different cultural backgrounds. However, this current study focuses on students’ challenges in writing an academic essay, particularly PBI-UKSW students from Bengkayang Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia.

The researcher is interested in exploring PBI-UKSW students’ challenges in writing an academic essay. More specifically, the current research is guided by the following research question: what are the students’ challenges in writing an academic essay?

Method

This study was conducted to explore PBI-UKSW students’ challenges in writing an academic essay. To achieve this goal, the researcher used the qualitative method with a narrative inquiry as a research design, focusing on collecting personal responses from research participants, seeing the real-world situations as they are (Mali, 2017) and studying them in detail through in-depth interviews (Ary et al., 2010; Cennetkuşu, 2017).

Data were collected from an Academic Writing class at PBI-UKSW. This course aims to enhance students’ ability, knowledge, and creativity to produce a good piece of writing.
(Budjalembo & Listiyani, 2020). In this class, students are expected to identify keywords and issues related to a particular topic, quotes, paraphrase sentences, summarize appropriately, integrate what others say with what they say, and avoid plagiarism (Listiyani, 2020). This course is a foundation class before the students take their research proposal course and write their undergraduate thesis (Mali, 2022).

The participants of this research were 10 EFL students from academic writing classes who took their Academic Writing course in the first semester of the academic year 2020/2021. Those ten students are from Bengkayang (one of the regencies in the province of West Kalimantan, Indonesia). These students were selected because they did not get a full score for their Academic Writing courses. To get those participants, the researcher asked their lecturer and even asked the participants directly to get information about their scores. Their name was kept pseudonymous to keep their confidentiality and make them comfortable giving information about the issue.

To garner the data, the researcher conducted a face-to-face semi-structured interview with the participants. A semi-structured interview enables a researcher to get more detailed information from the research participants by asking follow-up questions designed to probe more deeply into issues of interest to the participants (Dawson, 2009; Mali 2017). The main questions to ask in the interview are:

1. Could you please tell me the difficulties and challenges that you find/face when doing/writing an academic essay, especially your final project in the Academic Writing course?
2. How about the topic that you choose? Are there any difficulties and challenges you find/face when choosing the topic provided by the teacher?
3. Introduction: are there any difficulties and challenges you find/face when writing the introduction?
4. Thesis statement: are there any difficulties and challenges you find/face when writing the thesis statement?
5. Body paragraph: are there any difficulties and challenges you find/face when writing the body paragraph?
6. Topic sentence: are there any difficulties and challenges you find/face when writing and developing the topic sentence?
7. Conclusion: are there any difficulties and challenges you find/face when writing the conclusion?
8. References: are there any difficulties and challenges you find/face when writing the references?
9. Teachers’ feedback: are there any difficulties and challenges for you in understanding all the feedback you got from your teacher?
10. Last question, do you have other things (if any) you want to add and clarify?

To collect the data, the researcher did the following activities. Firstly, the researcher asked one of Bengkayang’s students who took an Academic Writing course in the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021. After gaining information about other Bengkayang students who took the Academic writing course in the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, the researcher started to contact them via WhatsApp and then made an appointment to do the interview.
The researcher then asked each of them to send their final project papers for Academic Writing course via WhatsApp and email. Then, the researcher printed out their papers. While meeting up directly with the participants to do the interview, the researcher brought and gave them the printed papers of their final project papers of Academic Writing course to recall their memories of their experiences in their academic writing course, such as when writing their final project papers. Two participants were interviewed online/via Zoom. All the interview sessions were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia.

Then, while in the interview session, the researcher audio-recorded all information or answers given by participants. After all interview sessions had been done, the researcher transcribed the recording of the interview using the InqScribe software and uploaded it to Google Drive. Then, the researcher sent the link of the interview script to the participants via WhatsApp and asked them to recheck whether the transcripts were what they really wanted to say. They were also allowed to add or clarify all information that they had given. This member-check strategy could enhance the credibility of research findings in a qualitative study (Ary et al., 2010; Mali & Salsbury, 2022).

The data gained from interviews were read and checked multiple times. After gaining the data needed, the researcher transcribed the interview data. In this phase, the researcher used thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from the semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was the most used method in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2014). In analyzing the data, the researcher underlined words or phrases that showed the answer to the research question and made them as themes presented in the findings and discussion section.

**Findings and discussion**

**Students find it challenging to develop their writing ideas**

Nine students seemed to be often stuck when they started to write. As stated in the interview, the students thought they had no idea how to continue writing.

The most challenging is looking for ideas for some themes that I needed to explain each part and expanding the ideas. Thus, looking for ideas to write in my essay was the most challenging part for me (Student 7, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

In the body paragraph part, I got stuck on what I should write because I have no ideas. The point is that things I already write in the beginning then I want to explain it in the body paragraph, but I got confused about how to develop the words and the ideas that I have in my mind (Student 3, Semi-structured interview, October 16, 2022, Researcher translation).

I am often confused about what I should write and discuss in the body paragraph and what else (Student 8, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

The finding is in line with the views that students had difficulty developing and organizing ideas (see Abbas & Herdi, 2018). In that case, it becomes challenging when the participants write their essays and then get stuck without progress. The most influential difficulty affected the participants’ essay writing performance.

**Students find it challenging to write sentences with correct grammar**

Six students stated that they found it challenging when writing English sentences. They often had grammatical mistakes in their writing, as described in the interview.
The difficulty was writing right and good sentences, then the grammar and vocabulary that I was unfamiliar with (Student 1, Semi-structured interview, October 08, 2022, Researcher translation).

I got stuck in many sentences connecting my ideas about what I wanted to say and some grammatical errors (Student 7, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

The most challenging part was grammar and word choices. I repeatedly got corrections on the grammar and word choices that I used (Student 10, Semi-structured interview, October 10, 2022, Researcher translation).

This finding accords with Fatimah (2018), who mentioned that EFL students have problems producing grammatically correct sentences in their academic writing work. Therefore, it made students get stuck in writing their essays and affected their writing quality and even made the students demotivated and confident in writing (Febriani, 2022).

**Students find it challenging to find references to support their writing**

Besides finding challenges in writing sentences with correct grammar, six students seemed that they also have difficulty in finding references to support their writing, as evident in the interview:

The challenging one was looking for the articles, like the quotations that support our argument, because if we stated our arguments without support from other articles or other researchers was considered inaccurate. The challenge was there. (Student 2, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

I could not find related sources to my topic and the sources that I used were almost all the sources that I used unrelated to my topic, so I got problems there (Student 10, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

This finding also shows difficulties in finding related references, especially to support their writing. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) found that lack of supporting references to support arguments in student’s essay was one of the difficulties that influence the student's motivation and student's writing quality. Student 1 also stated that when searching the related sources to support her essay, she needed help finding the recent articles or journals published in the last five years.

**Students find it challenging to write the end-text references of their essay**

Besides finding the references, seven students also found difficulty in writing the end-text references in their essays, as stated in the interview.

I needed clarification about how to write the position of the comma and drop mark and how to write the uppercase and lowercase letters because when I searched on Google, many styles of writing references confused me (Student 6, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

Yes, writing references. I got problems in writing references because when I write references, I sometimes write them wrong and confused on the location of the commas mark, drop mark and also was not suitable with the APA that my lecture asked me to use (Student 1, Semi-structured interview, October 28, 2022, Researcher translation).

Other students also stated that they had trouble inputting the references in their essays. After getting the articles or journals that support their essay, the students did not save them on Mendeley so it made the students get trouble when writing the end-text references of their essay, so they got many corrections and revisions there. This finding is also in
Students find it challenging to understand the lecturer's feedback

Three students also seemed to have challenges when understanding the feedback from their lecturer and were sometimes made them got confused, as evident in the interview as follow.

The problem was also from the lecturer. The feedback from him was not clear. Because when I got feedback from him, I did what he wanted but after that, in the next meeting he said that the revisions that I have done were wrong. It also makes me confused, too because this day he said A but the next day he said B (Student 5, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

Yes, sometimes, my lecturer was not consistent with what he said before. In the first consult, he said OK, you can go on. But the next consult, he said it was not suitable for my topic and I need to write it from the beginning again and change it all. It makes me frustrated and sometimes stuck to writing (Student 6, Semi-structured interview, October 24, 2022, Researcher translation).

I felt it a bit difficult because of some suggestions from my lecture that I could not understand during the online consultation. I also had limited time to ask because of online consultation and difficult to find a good time to ask and consult with my lecturer. Besides, when I ask many questions to my lecturer, I felt like I was disturbing my lecture time (Student 10, Semi-structured interview, October 31, 2022, Researcher translation).

Some students also mentioned that they were confused with the lecturer’s feedback after the first consultation and got some corrections and the lecture said that the students could continue their writing. Still, in the next consultation, the lecturer said that the students needed to change and revise some parts that had been revised and corrected by the lecture, so it confused the students because of the inconsistent lecture feedback. Similarly, Fareed et al. (2016) also found that students feel confused and unsatisfied with the teachers’ feedback on their work.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study reveals that the students’ challenges in writing an academic essay are related to developing writing ideas, writing sentences with correct grammar, finding references to support their writing, writing the end-text references of their paper, and understanding the feedback from the lecturer.

Regarding the findings of the current study, the research would like to propose the following recommendations for EFL lecturers teaching in a similar class. First, to help their students develop writing ideas in their essays, the lecturers can ask the students to practice using a mind-mapping to develop their writing ideas, which can be done in a group of three to four students. Second, to help their students find references more easily, the lecturers can recommend students spend time practicing using Google Scholar or using electronic resources provided by their university’s library, such as EBSCO and Oxford Academic Journals. Practically, the lecturer might invite the university librarian to come to the academic writing class and conduct a workshop on how to use those electronic resources. Third, to help the students in writing sentences with correct grammar, the lecturers can consider introducing students to Grammarly, especially the premium one, or other online grammar checkers, which might help them to minimize grammatical errors in their writing. Fourth, to help their students that have challenges in writing the end-text references of their paper, the
lecturers can suggest the students to using Mendeley which can help to generate the end-text references automatically. The lecturer can also consider giving the class exercises on writing the end-text references based on the recommended APA (7th ed.) referencing style in the class before the students are asked to write their essay. The researcher also suggests that lecturers to give more attention to students that have challenges in writing by deliberately suggesting suitable topics for the students, giving positive feedback, and giving more time to communicate with the students.

This study, however, was limited in the data collection process. There were only 10 Bengkayang students in the Academic Writing course participated in the study. Thus, further studies should follow up this study by involving more diverse research participants around Indonesia (i.e., students from Sumatera, Nusa Tenggara, Sulawesi, or Papua islands). It would be interesting if future researchers could compare the students’ challenges that appear in the context of the present study with those in similar academic writing courses in different universities to confirm if developing writing ideas, writing sentences with correct grammar, finding references to support their writing, writing the end-text references of their paper, and understanding the feedback from the lecturer are the common challenges experienced by EFL university students in Indonesia when they write an academic essay.

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References


