Research Article

EFL University Students' Difficulties in the Essay Writing Process

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A B S T R A C T

Research on foreign language writing has shown that most EFL students faced some difficulties to produce a good composition in English. However, attention has mainly been directed to explore errors found on students' written work. Little is known about what difficulties students have in the writing process. The present study investigates difficulties students faced in the six steps of writing process, namely choosing a topic, gathering ideas, outlining or organizing ideas, writing the first draft, reviewing the content and structure, as well as revising and making final correction. This study applied a qualitative method by using questionnaire and interview to collect the data. The subjects were English Language Education students who were taking an Essay Writing course in the third semester. The findings indicate that students face difficulties in all steps of essay writing process. Among those six steps, outlining and gathering ideas are claimed as the most effortful steps students have to pass. Writing the first draft and revising are the next two steps considered as challenging. Lastly, choosing a topic and reviewing content and structure are also demanding for small part of students. The difficulties students have and suggestions they propose are presented in this study. Those could be a basis for doing some improvements at institutional as well as individual level.

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INTRODUCTION

Many students who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can speak the language well enough for daily communication such as greeting people, shopping, and travelling. However, the same students are often surprised when coming to writing classes. They find that writing in English is much more difficult than speaking (Bailey, 2018). The reason for this situation is that speaking is done in a real time and the speakers can repeat their utterance when listeners do not understand, while this cannot happen in writing. The writers need to write as clearly as possible so that it is easy to understand by readers.

Students have to write many forms of writing for their assignments at the university including essays and reports. According to Harmer (2004), writing good composition is seen as one of the most challenging tasks students face. Students in EFL classroom even find double difficulty, as they must write in not their mother tongue language. They often find the written requirements of each course demanding. Issues around academic vocabulary, paraphrasing, referencing, and plagiarism add more worries. To deal with these problems, teachers often guide the students through step-by-step of writing process. This assistance aims at helping students to write clearly and concisely.

There are six steps of the writing process according to Zemach and Rumisek (2004), they are choosing a topic, gathering ideas, organizing or outlining, writing the first draft, reviewing the content and structure, as well as revising and making final correction. Among those steps, many students find pre-writing activities as the most difficult ones (Ashrafiany, Fatsah, and Basalama, 2020; Suprapto, et. al., 2022). Pre-writing activities include choosing a topic, gathering ideas, and organizing or outlining. Students find it difficult because they need to read some sources before choosing a topic. Once they have a topic, they need to deal with writing a good thesis statement in introduction (Wijaya, 2017), a clear topic sentence in each body paragraphs, and a brief conclusion for their outline.

Several studies on exploring students' problems in essay writing have been conducted. Most of them stated that students often have problems in writing because of grammar (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017; Maysuroh, Maryadi, and Supiani, 2017; Alisha, Safitri, and Santoso, 2019; Toba, Noor, and Sanu, 2019; Bulqiyah, Mahbub, and Nugraheni, 2021). The common mistakes students did in essay writing including tenses, subject-verb agreement, article, plural form, pronoun, auxiliary, and sentence fragment. As grammar plays an important role in writing, it is necessary for students to understand grammar rules before start writing. In addition, grammar and writing teachers need to work collaboratively in order to help students succeed in writing an essay.

Another problem encountered by students while writing an essay is vocabulary (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017; Maysuroh, Maryadi, and Supiani, 2017; Alisha, Safitri, and Santoso, 2019; Toba, Noor, and Sanu, 2019; Bulqiyah, Mahbub, and Nugraheni, 2021). Vocabulary becomes the second biggest problem students need to deal with as to write an essay they need a great amount of vocabulary. Students often have difficulties in choosing correct words to express their ideas. They also need to use academic words to produce a high quality essay. Therefore, writing teachers may collaborate with reading teachers so that those two skills are integrated another.

The next problem found in students' writing relates to mechanics (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017; Maysuroh, Maryadi, and Supiani, 2017; Alisha, Safitri, and Santoso, 2019; Toba, Noor, and Sanu, 2019). Errors in punctuations, capitalizations, and spellings are seen as common mistakes faced by EFL students. Even though they write their essay in a Word document, which it really helps because of the automated capitalization and spelling check features, misspelling still can be found in students' writing. Toba, Noor, and Sanu (2019) report that students mainly concern on getting ideas instead of checking spelling errors in their essay.

Cohesion and coherence are also considered as difficult aspect for students to write in English (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017). Students often face some difficulties in connecting one sentence to another in one paragraph. They sometimes writes too many sentences in a paragraph which some of those sentences do not support the main idea. Hence, those too long paragraphs make their writing confusing and not readable.

Instead of the four aforementioned problems, students also have difficulties in essay organization (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017; Toba, Noor, and Sanu, 2019; Ashrafiany, Fatsah, and Basalama, 2020; Bulqiyah, Mahbub, and Nugraheni, 2021). Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) point out that many students write either too many sentences or only one long sentence in a paragraph. Students are also lack of using transition signals that make their essay not well organized. Besides, they often forget to put a topic sentence in each body paragraphs.

The majority of previous studies have revealed that students have difficulties in all aspects of writing including grammar or language use, vocabulary, mechanics, cohesion and coherence, and essay organization. They mainly focused on analyzing students' essays in English, only few investigated the process of students in writing an essay. This study then attempts to explore difficulties students face in the essay writing process. In particular, the study plans to investigate not only the difficulties faced by the students but also their suggestions and expectations for the teachers to teach in essay writing class. The research questions posed for this study are as follows:

1. What are the difficulties students had in the process of essay writing?

2. What are the suggestions students proposed for the teachers?

METHOD

This study was carried out by using a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a type of educational research where to collect the data the researcher interviews the participants, ask general questions related to the issue, and the data are mainly in the form of words. There are certain advantages of doing qualitative study in education. One of them is its potential to explore the complexities of an issue (Flick, 2008). Qualitative researchers mostly collect data in a natural setting. They gather information by directly interacting with people and seeing them behave and act within their environment. In addition, they typically collect multiple forms of data such as interviews, observations, and documents, not just merely focusing on single form of data (Creswell, 2013).

The participants of this study were 66 English language education students from a state university in Malang, Indonesia. They were 24 male students and 42 female students. Those students were taking an Essay Writing course in the third semester. The first stage of collecting data was distributing an online questionnaire consist of both open and close-ended questions. The questions were dealing with the six steps of writing process and difficulties students faced during writing an essay. Furthermore, in order to support the data found from the questionnaire, the researcher also did interview to six participants to dig more information related to their difficulties during essay writing process and suggestions for the teacher. The interview took approximately five minutes long for each participant. The last stage was analyzing data. Data from questionnaire and interview were calculated, transcribed, coded, analyzed, and presented in the form of description.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to find out the difficulties students faced in the process of essay writing and their suggestions for the teacher. Here are the results of questionnaire and interview.

1. Students' difficulties in the essay writing process

The objective of essay writing course is to help students be able to produce a variety of essays in English. In the end of the course, an online questionnaire was distributed to identify students' difficulties during writing process. The results of the questionnaire are as follow:
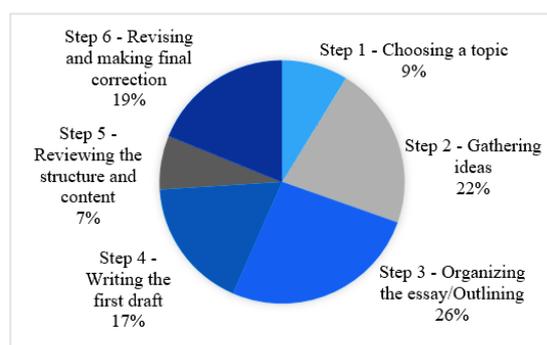
Figure 1. The most difficult step in essay writing process

Figure 1 shows that 26% of the students chose step 3 (making an outline) as the most difficult step to pass, while some of them (22%) claimed step 2 (gathering ideas) as a challenging step. Few of them (19%) argued that step 6 (revising and making final correction) is not easy to do. Around 10 students (17%) stated that step 4 (writing the first draft) needs more effort. There are 9% who confirmed step 1 (choosing a topic) is a daunting task. Small part of them (7%) opted reviewing the structure and content as a complicated step.

The findings above indicated that students find difficulties in all stages of the essay writing process. Outlining and gathering ideas were two stages that got the highest score respectively, which means many students put much effort in these two. This is in line with Ashrafiany, Fatsah, and Basalama (2020), Bulqiyah, Mahbub, and Nugraheni (2021), and Suprapto, et. al. (2022) who find that most students have difficulties in pre-writing activities. These activities may include generating ideas, outlining and organizing ideas. Ashrafiany, Fatsah, and Basalama (2020) argue that students were difficult to outline their essay because they have limited information about the topic. Similarly, Bulqiyah, Mahbub, and Nugraheni (2021) contend that students' major problems in essay writing were in the context of generating ideas.

Considering the difficulties students have before writing an essay, Mahnam and Nejadansari (2012) propose pre-writing strategies such as concept mapping, reading relevant text, and negotiation. They confirmed that these strategies had significant effects on students' writing achievement. These might help students to build more cognitive structures and give more information that are essential for writing. Another solution is offered by Alemu (2020) to help students generating ideas. There are four activities can be employed including brainstorming, clustering, free writing, and questioning. These activities eventually help students to come up with adequate ideas to develop a text.

The next steps that need more effort are writing the first draft (step 4) as well as revising and making final correction (step 6). Many students report that pouring ideas into writing is challenging since they need to consider paragraph organization, word choice, punctuation, and coherence aspects (Suprapto, et. al., 2022). Moreover, drafting might take many of the writer's time. A writer needs to spend much time in writing first-draft rough, searching, and re-writing unfinished draft. Regarding the revising and making final correction step. Bulqiyah, Mahbub, and Nugraheni (2021) point out that several students do not revise and rewrite their essay. Lack of motivation is the reason that hinders students to make some corrections on their writing.

Finally, the last two steps in the writing process that only few students felt problematic were choosing a topic (step 1) and reviewing essay's structure and content (step 5). Students believe that choosing a topic was a crucial step that determine whether it will be easy or not to write the whole essay. Therefore, students need to think about the topic for some times. In the reviewing step, students reported that it took much time

and required a detail analysis to produce a well-structured essay.

Regarding the difficulties students faced in each step, here are the result from both questionnaire and interview:

a. Difficulties in step 1 (choosing a topic)

The difficulties students have in choosing a topic for essay mainly relate to require adequate information about the chosen topic.

> *"You must know well about your topic that you choose and maybe it can take longer time to searching about the topic."* (P10, Male)

> *"Choosing a topic must be considered carefully, whether you will be easy to get the ideas or not. If the ideas are hard to come by, then we cannot start writing the essay."* (P19, Female)

> *"Choosing the topic is quite difficult because it relates to what we will write and discuss later."* (P22, Male)

b. Difficulties in step 2 (gathering ideas)

The majority of students who choose step 2 as the most difficult step declared that they need more time and knowledge to generate ideas well.

> *"We need much time for gathering and making ideas. We also must have some references to get the ideas."* (P7, Male)

> *"Sometimes I lack of knowledge about the topic, or suddenly the ideas that have appeared about the topic disappear."* (P17, Female)

> *"When I just found the topic, I knew what I must to write but I don't know how to develop the ideas."* (P21, Male)

c. Difficulties in step 3 (outlining/organizing essay)

Teaching students on how to create an outline is important as some of them still find it difficult to plan their essay.

> *"It is difficult to determine the points that should be added in the outline."* (P1, Female)

> *"I am still confuse how to make a good outline."* (P26, Male)

> *"When making an outline, we must create a framework that can be described or explained in detail."* (P50, Female)

d. Difficulties in step 4 (writing the first draft)

Writing the first draft is always challenging for many EFL students. This is because they have low self-confidence in writing and they lack of writing practice.

> *"Sometimes I am confused how to start a paragraph, what sentence to write, and then what description to write in the first sentence."* (P13, Female)

> *"I am bad at organizing my thoughts into writing and couldn't find the right vocabulary."* (P31, Female)

> *"When I was going to write an essay, I was confused about whether to start or combine my sentences to make a coherent and concise sentence."* (P46, Female)

e. Difficulties in step 5 (reviewing the structure and content)

Students report that reviewing the structure and content of their essay are time consuming and demanding.

> *"Reviewing the structure and the content take a lot of time and it is not easy."* (P28, Male)

> *"I became confused about what to include and fit in each paragraph in the essay."* (P37, Female)

> *"At reviewing step, we have to analyze the essay as much detail as possible. We must pay attention to the unity and continuity of the elements of the essay content so that we can minimize errors."* (P39, Male)

f. Difficulties in step 6 (revising and making final correction)

The last step of writing process is difficult for few students because they need to fix writing errors (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and mechanics), require endless proofreading, and feel exhausted.

> *"When I revise and make final correction, I usually find so many mistakes on my writing. Those mistakes includes incorrect coherence and unity of the essay, as well as improper diction/vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Therefore, I need to check those proofreading aspects one by one."* (P57, Female)

> *"I always think that my essay or my writing is good enough so I feel lazy to revise and do some correction on my writing."* (P63, Male)

2. EFL students' expectations and suggestions for the teacher

The essay writing process, in general, is considered as a daunting process because of various difficulties. Focusing on exploring what expectations/suggestions for the teacher, following are the results from interview.

a. Making writing as a routine activity

To master English we have to use it every day. We cannot master writing skill immediately unless we turn writing into a routine activity. Hence, many students are suggested to take a lot of practice (Alfaki, 2015). Teacher needs to encourage and to motivate students to take responsibility for improving their own writing skill. In addition, teacher can allocate some times in the early classes to develop a writing culture (Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal, 2016). To take an example, 10 minutes in the beginning of the class are devoted for free writing as a warm up activity.

> "Teacher can ask students to write as a daily exercise to improve their writing." (P1, Female)

> "To improve essay writing skills we have to practice a lot and read a lot, and teacher should facilitate them." (P2, Female)

> "I think I should read many articles or anything that can increase my knowledge and then practice writing more." (P3, Female)

b. Integrating reading into writing class

Reading is closely related to writing. It can improve students' vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. Therefore, students proposed "reading a lot" as one activity included in the essay writing course. Through reading, students can learn from what they have read (Alfaki, 2015). Mahnam and Nejadansari (2012) also proved that asking students to read relevant text as pre-writing activity ultimately could improve students' writing skills.

> "Teacher can ask students to reading a lot, because from reading we can learn how other people write to convey their messages to the readers." (P1, Female)

> "To improve essay writing skills we have to practice a lot and read a lot, and teacher should facilitate them." (P2, Female)

> "I need to read more references to make a good essay." (P4, Female)

c. Providing more guidance for individual students

Intensive guidance from the teacher is considered as the top priority needed by students during writing process. Teacher plays important role in monitoring students' progress in each step. It is also true that this guidance will eventually increase students' motivation to finish their writing (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017). Other assistance from teacher could be in the form of giving a detail feedback. Kamberi (2013) asserts that students preferred to get direct corrective feedback from teacher because it guide them to correct their mistakes.

> "It is hard for me to understand when I am in online meeting. The only I need is an offline meeting. I need a direct guidance from the teacher." (P5, Male)

> "Maybe the teacher can make correction for every essay during the class (grammar, pronunciation, spelling, etc) and explain the mistakes." (P6, Female)

CONCLUSION

The current study reveals that students face difficulties in all steps of essay writing process. Outlining and gathering ideas are claimed as the most effortful steps students have to pass mainly due to lack of information about the topic, time consuming, and less understanding on ideas organization. Writing the first draft and revising are the next two steps considered as challenging because students have to deal with writing aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, mechanic, coherence, and essay organization. Finally yet importantly, choosing a topic and reviewing content and structure were also demanding because of needing a lot of time, ability, and energy. Hence, considering these problems, several activities are suggested including making writing a daily activity, integrating reading into writing class, and providing more guidance for individual students.

To conclude, the finding of this study can be as a basis for doing some improvements at institutional as well as individual level. For institutions, it would be better to review the contents of writing courses. It is important to note that writing is best connected to reading. Therefore, integrating reading into writing courses will be beneficial. For individuals involved in the writing process, namely students and teachers, are suggested to continuously put many efforts to resolve writing difficulties. Producing a good essay requires more writing practice and reading academic English as well as intensive guidance from the teacher.

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