

Essay Writing Performances at the Tertiary Level: The Case of Indonesian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Some methods and approaches have been put into practice by stakeholders, including both teachers and lecturers in the teaching and learning process of English, specifically writing. Nevertheless, writing English is still burdensome for some learners, particularly EFL learners. For this reason, the survey study was conducted to point out the mistakes made by the students in composing an essay. Eleven EFL learners, coming from non-Anglicized linguistic and cultural backgrounds at the *Institut Ilmu Keislaman Zainul Hasan Genggong, Probolinggo*, East Java, Indonesia were taken out as the sample of this study. The major instruments distributed to the students were writing prompts and semi-structured interview. Their writing results were scored with the scoring scale adopted from Jacobs (1981), cited in (Weigle, 2002, p. 116). From the five components in writing, consisting of Vocabulary, Content, Language Use related to the ideas in the text, Organization of the text, and Mechanics. The results demonstrate that Language use (Tense, Preposition, Run-ons, and Articles) and Mechanics (Spelling, Punctuation, and Capitalization) are dominant errors committed by the EFL Learners in writing.

Keywords: Essay, Writing Performance, EFL Learners

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning English has been introduced by several stakeholders, including teachers and lecturers. Many of the stakeholders have widely implemented specific methods or techniques in order for their students to be proficient in this subject. Nevertheless, the learning of English, for instance, in EFL educational context, is still at a low level. A multitude of reasons are stated by students, several of whom state that they have a deficiency in vocabulary, they less learn English because they are fed up with the use of grammars. Furthermore, they barely practice English at home since English is hard to learn. A case in point is the learning of writing. Some students are sometimes confused because they have no vocabulary to reveal. It is clear that the writing task is quite complex. As has been stated by Kelly (2015, p.81) that the nature of writing tasks faced by the students becomes quite complex. In the meantime, Levin (1993) states

this situation might happen because both EFL and ESL students do not have adequate vocabulary, they are afraid of criticism, and do not have a will to involve in emotions when dealing with a topic.

Writing English is now considered substantial. Afshar, Movassagh, & Arbabi (2017, p.03) state that writing English as a foreign language is a challenging task requiring L2 knowledge of linguistics and the dissemination of this knowledge. Both EFL and ESL students are strongly recommended to master this skill since today English is widely used all over the world. Leki (2000, p.199) in Phuket & Otman (2015) states that English writing in both educational and professional settings is increasingly important in non-native English speakers' countries. Moreover, skill in writing also depends on the students' motivation to write and their previous experiences in writing. As defined by Jones (2001), cited in (Williams & Takaku, 2011) that writing ability covers a wide range of skills and writing indeed depends on ample factors, such as motivation, reading ability, genre analysis, as well as the writers' previous experiences.

The aim of this writing skill is many, including writing for expressing one's feelings, achievements, dreams, and writing for opinions (Hosseini, et al, 2019, p. 34). Therefore, writing is considered essential in this case. Although this has been encouraged, a batch of errors is still committed by the students as what has been given examples above. To some extent, all of these issues might be attributed to their poor writing habits. Based on the observation undertaken by the English lecturer at Institut Ilmu Keislaman Zainul Hasan, Genggong, Probolinggo, female and male EFL students frequently make some errors in writing.

Accordingly, a current study was made to investigate the students' errors in composing academic writing text, specifically essay writing. One of the reports by a researcher has been legibly elucidated that EFL learners still confront a number of complexities in writing satisfying essays (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017, p. 80). As a result, it is significant to conduct a study on examining learners' performance in essay writing. A large number of studies have been conducted by researchers in terms of L2 writing abilities. First, the study was conducted by Tan and Manochphinyo (2017). The study investigated the accuracy of grammar in writing by identifying direct and indirect written corrective feedback. They employed a quasi-experimental research which recruited 120 students. The result of their studies demonstrated that indirect WCF was more efficacious than direct WCF for writing instruction and the performance of the students. Second, a study was also made by Bourke and Holbrook (1992). They carried out a study on university students' writing errors. They recruited 310 students with 15 disciplines each. The findings of their studies showed that the students, for the most part, committed errors in punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure. Law and Economics students made the greatest error rates, while Geography, Mechanical Engineering, Philosophy, Linguistics, History, and Sociology, committed the errors around the value of median. In the meantime, French and Psychology students pointed out a small number of errors. To the good knowledge of the researcher, this research is not extensively carried out by researchers, especially at the university level.

Conducting a study on academic writing has also been encouraged by a few theorists in that academic reading and writing complexities are still worth examining (Phakiti & Liu, 2011, p. 232). In addition, Coxhead (2012, p. 144) encourages that another research may take a look at other sorts of academic writing, such as reports and ponder their effect on making decisions and the use of vocabulary. Therefore the current study is centralized on academic writing, particularly essay writing. This study was conducted at *Institut Ilmu Keislaman Zainul Hasan, Genggong, Probolinggo*, which is one of the higher private colleges in Indonesia. The current study seeks to address the questions below:

1. What are the complexities faced by the learners in writing an essay?
2. Of the five components, including Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language use, and Mechanics, what are the more frequent mistakes made by the learners in writing an essay?

The significance of this study is intended for stakeholders in particular, including both teachers and students. For the teachers, the result of the study may make a considerable impact on the teaching and learning program of writing. The teachers may be able to improve their students' writing performance since they have known the most common errors committed by students in academic writing especially those teaching at the university. In the meantime, the result of this study may become a source for other researchers to conduct research in a more academically writing context. The researchers may conduct further researches in writing.

1.1 Theoretical underpinnings

Writing English is an important skill, particularly in the field of ELT. A number of students in Indonesia attempt to acquire this skill with the fast path. However, writing skill is not easily achieved, this skill is quite complex. Kim (2005) states that learning writing is a tough prowess for students to promote and learn, especially in the EFL context. Another statement is also expounded by Tan & Manochpinyo (2017). They state that writing is essential for university students who need to accomplish many written assignments and still for written examinations (Tan & Manochpinyo, 2017). Therefore, this is to say that learners need to develop their writing competency for their own needs at school or at the University. Apart from them, Taylor (2009) states that writing can be a difficult task if the writers attempt to combine language and ideas they have. Furthermore, Erkan & Saban (2011, p.165) assert that writing is active as well as productive skill and those learning this skill will face multiple challenges. Therefore, this statement implies that writing requires a wealth of practice so that the writer will not have difficulties in writing.

In promoting this skill, the learners are very feasible to commit errors. The errors committed by the students due to their little acquaintance with this skill. Phuket (2015) states that errors are viewed as the non-native outcomes of the learners' inadequate linguistics knowledge. This statement implied that the students are supposed to learn a great number of grammar or language rules, lexical choice, and a great number of vocabularies. These need to be extended in the

writing process so that they can be proficient in writing. Besides, the students need to have orthographic knowledge such as punctuation, hyphens, capitalization, and the like.

As the writer's own experience, writing English is a daunting task. It requires carefulness, accuracy, and a solid knowledge of the topic. And therefore that should be done smoothly. Nguyen (2015) points out that writing is a complex process requiring care and accuracy and it is, therefore, to be done smoothly. Al-Badi (2015) further states that writing not only utilizes cognitive skills but also demands a complex mental production comprising careful thought, discipline, and concentration. These statements put particular emphasis on learners that they need to critically think and state the ideas clearly in the text so that their writing is great. After all, the quality of writing is indeed influenced by writers' proficiency level they have (Soleimani, et al., 2015, p. 03).

Common English strategies used in the process of writing are, for example, brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. These steps are required in the writing process. Heffernan (1982) states that writing is a solitary act as a medium of communication. It has a great advantage over speaking. It provides an opportunity for the writers to think, to come up with ideas on the paper, to choose words, to read what has been written, to reconsider, revise and to reorganize it, and most importantly, to take into account of the effects on readers.

Yugianingrum (2010, p. 40-41) states that characters of good academic writing are as follows; 1) In the related community, writing should perform an essential role; 2) The topic shall be enticing for the writer; 3) It is required that writer considers the aesthetic quality of the text he or she writes; and 4) The community should assist writers in assessing the relevant sources and gaining support and guidance.

Over and above that, academic writing, including essays, should contain complex, objective, formal, explicit, rigorous, and accurate language (Gillet, 2017, cited in Aunurrahman, 2017).

In brief, academic writing is still merited to discuss for it is complex and of advantage. This study was intended and is hoped that it would contribute significantly to a number of stakeholders as well as the students at the university.

2. Method

Employing a survey research design, the current study attempted to scrutinize the performance of EFL University students' essay writing at Institut Ilmu Keislaman Zainul Hasan Genggong, Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia. Cresswell (2012, p. 376) notes that survey research designs are procedure in quantitative research in which researchers administer a survey to a sample or to the entire population of people to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and the characteristics of the population. The steps in doing this involve (1). Decide if a survey is the best design to use, (2). Identify the research question and hypothesis, (3). Identify the population or sampling, (4). Determine the data collection procedure, (5). Administer instrument, (6). Analyze the data to address the research questions, and (7). Write the report.

2.1 Participants

The participants taken out in this study are the EFL students at Institut Ilmu Keislaman Zainul Hasan Genggong, Probolinggo, Indonesia. It consisted of eleven EFL learners, majoring in English Education Program and coming from non-Anglicized linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They all were recruited by using a random sampling. In this case, the researchers choose the sample representative of the population so that claims or inferences can be drawn from the sample to the population (Cresswell, 2012, 381).

2.2 Data collection

In garnering the data, the researchers utilized writing prompts and held a semi-structured interview with EFL learners. The writing prompts allowed the students to write a text talking over their own dreams in life whether they want to become a doctor, teacher, scientist, or other professions, containing topic sentence, supporting sentence, and concluding sentence. Accordingly, the explanation may vary considerably.

The following is the writing prompts specifically designed according to Kroll and Reid (1994: 233):

Some people have a dream or a career they want to achieve in life. Some of you have a passion for making your dream come true whether it becomes a doctor, a teacher, a scientist or other types of career you want to have in the future. Write an essay in which you discuss your dream. State at least three reasons why you pursue that dream, containing topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences.

The above prompt is the framed prompts. According to Kroll and Reid (1994, p. 233), a framed prompts are prompts in which a set of circumstances is provided, and then the assignment is performed based on the construction of the frame. The prompt above has been based on some variables, including Contextual variable, Content variable, Linguistic variable, Task variable, Rhetorical variable, Evaluation variable.

Apart from that, a semi-structured interview was held by the researchers to the EFL students so as to investigate the attitudes or opinions they hold towards the essay writing process. The interview lasted around one hour and was concentrated on the complexities in essay writing.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis process, especially with respect to writing prompts was based on Jacobs (1981) cited in (Weigle, 2002, p. 116), comprising the evaluation of *Content, Vocabulary, Language Use, Organization, and Mechanics* in their writing essay. The aim of this is to know whether the students commit mistakes or not towards those five aspects of writing. Meanwhile, for the interview, the researchers analyze by using content analysis, starting from coding, categorizing, and forming themes.

3. Results

The findings of this study are classified into some criteria, including Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language use, and Mechanics. The results are as follows:

3.1. Content

In this case, the students writing is evaluated whether the ideas stated in the paper are relevant to the topic, having comprehensive knowledge, substantive, and having developed topics. The result of the study, in terms of the content, ranges from **very poor** to **excellent to very good**. From the evaluation, only one student got **excellent to very good**. It means that he can explore the ideas clearly, able to develop the topics and has a solid knowledge of the topics he discusses. Then there are five students got the level at **good to average** in which it is between 22 and 26 on the scoring scale. It reveals that the students writing at this level demonstrate adequate explanation of the topic, relevant to the topic but still lacks details. Next, there are four students achieving the level of **fair to good**. This demonstrates that the learners have rudimentary knowledge of the topic; they also cannot develop the topic adequately. The last, there is only one student who is at the level of **very poor**. This shows that he cannot develop the topic, and does not have adequate knowledge of the topic he discusses. As a result, his writing is not substantive (absolute).

Few examples of the students' writing that are poor in **content** are portrayed in the following:

Student 9:

“Being a lecturer is one of the comfortable professions in my opinion. The reasons why I want to be a lecturer:

Firstly, because the profession is very supported by my parents,

Secondly, because this profession is one of the many benefits, such as passing knowledge to many people

Thirdly, because the profession does not take much time. “

Student 10:

“Being a police was my dream. My reasons of being teachers are:

First, we can drain our knowledge.

Second, being a teacher is enjoy job for me like we just repeat what we studied before. The last is because of my father. He is a motivator for me.”

3.2. Organization

In terms of organization, in writing, the students are classified from **fair to poor** to **excellent to very good**. There are two students who reach the level of **excellent to very good**. They are able to state the ideas clearly, express them fluently, concise (succinct) having logical sequencing, and they are able to organize the ideas properly. In the meantime, seven students achieve the level of **good to average**. They demonstrate the ideas a little rough and have limited support. However, the ideas are still logical but having incomplete sequencing. Next, there are

two students remaining at the level of **fair to poor**. It demonstrates that their ideas in writing are confused, show disconnected ideas, and cannot develop the ideas (lack of ideas).

For example, see the following:

Student 3:

It can be seen that the student' writing have limited support, ideas a little rough, and no conclusion signals at the end of the paragraph. See the following:

“My dream is will be a lecturer because I know if I can be a lecturer I can give my students some knowledge...”

My first strength was mother because my mother wanted me to become a lecturer...

Second is my father support because he is also a teacher...

The last is myself, I will make my parent happy and I will return to my parent...”

3.3. Vocabulary

In vocabulary, the students achieve the level from **fair to poor** to **good to average**. Seven students achieving the level of **fair to poor** claims that they have limited vocabulary to reveal. They committed some errors in terms of words they use and they do not even know the choice of the words. In other words, they use several unnatural vocabularies, not based on the collocation, whereas the learners who reach the level of **good to average show** adequate ranges of vocabulary, that is, four students. They are able to use some extensive vocabulary even though occasional errors of words/ word choice are still made by the students yet the meaning is still clear.

The following is one of the examples of their writing:

Student 5:

My dream is to be an English teacher, Because I love English so much, from elementary school exactly, I take English department in this college because I want to reach my fucking dream. I want to master all about English, like Grammar, Vocabulary, and especially writing & speaking. I want to be able to speak English; I also want to learn how to spell every word in English sentence. Sometimes, I learn English use by watching movie, listening music, and also read everything about English. I believe that I can pursue my dream, so that why I have to study hard.

It is clear that the student cannot extend their vocabulary in writing. The words seem unnatural or not based on the collocation in English.

3.4. Language Use

With regard to language use, it ranges from **fair to good** to **good to average**. At the level of fair to good, four students, for the most part, committed some mistakes in tenses (grammar), including articles, pronouns, and prepositions. They also joined two sentences without using a comma or the so-called as run-ons. In regard to tenses, formerly stated, the students committed some mistakes in terms of present tense, future tense, preposition, and parallel structure. As a result, the meaning is confused. Apart from it, there are seven students who reach the level of

good to average. However, they demonstrate some errors in tenses, articles, and simple constructions, but the meaning is still clear and effective.

Several examples are as follows:

Student 10:

“Police woman was very cool. But that was just my desire in my hallunation and know my dream is being a teacher (Her writing, line 2 and 3).”

Student 3:

“Second is my father’s support because him is also teacher and him will I can be lecturer.(Her writing, line 8 and 9).”

Another example is that the student joined the two sentences without using a comma, called as Run-ons. See the following:

Student 8:

“There are many reasons why I want to be an ambassador of Indonesia. First, an ambassador is talented people he must have some important abilities.(Her writing, Line 2 and 3).”

He committed mistakes on Run-ons in the underlined sentences.

Student 4:

“Thirdly: after become the useful people, I can make my parents happy because of me.”

Student 6:

“Beside my lecture activities, I plan to dispatch the Hajj of both parents.”

The student committed errors in preposition. That was supposed to be: *after becoming*. Because *after* is a preposition.

Beside was supposed to be “*Besides*”.

3.5. Mechanics

Apart from those above, in mechanics, the researcher evaluates their writing in terms of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The results range from **fair to good Average**. Only three Students achieve the level of **fair to good**, which demonstrate some problems in capitalization and punctuation. They still make mistakes in using capitalization in the first line and placing a drop at the end of the sentence. In addition, there are eight students remaining at the level of **good to Average**. They demonstrate some errors in punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. However, the meaning is still clear enough.

The examples of the students’ mistakes in both capitalization and punctuation are in the following:

Student 3:

“my first strength was mother because my mother wanted me to become a lecturer...(Her writing, line 5). my first strength in this case is supposed to be capitalized so it becomes “My first strength”. ”

Student 10:

“When I was a child, Being a police woman was my dream. (Her writing line 1).”

Student 5:

“My dream is to be English teacher, Because I love English so much, from elementary school exactly. (Her writing, line 1 &2).”

Student 10:

“My reasons of being teacher are. the first we can drain our knowledge, the second being a teacher is enjoy job...(Her writing, line 4 & 5).”

3.6. Findings of the Interview

The findings of the interview made the researchers aware of the students’ performances in writing. Based on the interview results, the researchers categorized three major difficulties as the findings of this study, consisting of *difficulties in syntax*, *difficulties in the writing process*, and *difficulties in expressing their ideas*. According to the students’ perspective, seven (63.6%) of the students revealed that they always have difficulty using sentence structure, capitalization, and punctuation. They stated that they have studied grammar repeatedly. Nevertheless, they always find it difficult in the writing process. four (36.3%) stated that they do not have any ideas to reveal in the process of writing. They are often blank when they are in the writing process. After all, the findings of this study imply that the students require sufficient practice in writing so that they can write English properly and effectively.

4. Discussion

In line with the research questions posed in the previous chapter, including what are the complexities encountered by the students in writing an essay ?, and from the five components, including Content, Vocabulary, Language use, Organization, and Mechanics, what are the more frequent errors committed by the students in writing an essay?. The results have addressed the questions. If the main aim of learning writing is to write well and appropriately, then good writing should include content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. They are supposed to be available in the writing process. Their writing should also transfer some knowledge to the readers so that the readers can comprehend what they mean in their written paper. In order that this process is well understood by the students, and then a common technique in writing can be practiced by the students, including planning (preparing what they are going to write), drafting (writing), editing, including reflecting and revising, and final draft (Harmer, 2004). In planning, the students may prepare for several things, such as making a detailed note in order that they can prepare what they are going to write. (Harmer, 2014) also further states that experienced writers should do these three processes in planning; they include aims, audience/reader and content structure. Second, in drafting, or this is the process of writing in a paper or the opening version of a piece of writing is called drafting (Harmer, 2004). Third, editing or this process encompasses both reflecting and revising which are vital to the writing process. The purpose of this is to revise some parts of writing such as sentence structures like tenses, prepositions, articles, and other divisions of editing in the writing. Last is the final draft. The

final draft, in this case, means that their written product that has been changed or edited is ready to send to its intended audience.

The results above made the researcher alive to the importance of writing appropriately and effectively in English using good strategy or technique of writing so that the writers can raise their awareness of correctness and appropriateness in writing. The researcher knows that the students above are still flustered about writing an essay in English correctly and appropriately. As has been given examples above, the students made some errors in several points, including verbs, preposition, nouns, capitalization, punctuation, tenses, namely future tenses and parallel structures. In this case, the learners are not mindful of the accuracy in writing. Many researchers have pointed out that L2 writers commit errors overall, including more morphosyntactic errors, more lexicosemantic errors, more errors with the verbs, prepositions, articles, and nouns. (Benson, 1980; stalker & stalker 1998; Terdal 1985; Yu & Atkinson, 1988), cited in Silva (1993). Then it can be briefly stated that the difficulties had by the students include content that is related to the ideas they present in the text, organization of writing, including topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences that some students above are still neglected in their writing process. Other parts include language use, vocabulary, and mechanics. The findings of this study are in consonance with the results of the study undertaken by Rahmatunnisa (2014) in Indonesia. Her study findings demonstrate that EFL learners in Indonesia have grappled with three main issues in writing: linguistic problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. Linguistic problems related to the grammatical structure, word classes, formatting words, errors in terms of using words, and the use of articles. Cognitive problems are concerned with organizing a paragraph, lost in generic structure, drawing a conclusion, and employing punctuation. Whereas psychological problems are linked with laziness, getting into a bad mood to write, and having trouble to begin to write (Rahmatunnisa, 2014).

The learners above cannot extend their vocabulary so that they only present a small piece of writing. As a result, they cannot develop the topic or an idea in writing. Language use and mechanics are also problematic to the students since they commit errors in punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structures, including present tense, past tense, preposition, articles, and so forth. Of the five components in writing, the students committed errors most of all with respect to grammatical structures (language use) and punctuation and capitalization (mechanics). This can be concluded that their knowledge of writing is not comprehensive. They, therefore, require some practice or training of writing so that they can produce well in writing. It can be virtually possible to be trained by some stakeholders, for example, teachers and lecturers in order for the learners to be capable of writing an essay effectively and appropriately.

Further studies in terms of this are highly recommended since this is only conducted at one of the private Indonesian Universities using a small-scale study. Further research may be undertaken in other educational settings along with the higher level of educations, such as, in postgraduate students' writing, or in a course focusing on the writing process using larger samples.

5. Conclusion

It is perceptible that errors committed by the students in writing are, for the most part, present tense, past tense, and past perfect tense. On top of that, the students are lack of orthographic knowledge. The students are not well-recognized with the structures used in the language, especially in English as their foreign language. These errors then characterize their writing in academic English.

It is strongly recommended for the teachers, especially EFL teachers to not only assign the students to perform their writing competency but also provide them with sufficient feedback so that the students will be able to be more critically and more easily adapted in their writing. Besides, the teachers should provide them with high motivation in writing English since they rarely practice writing. This is of importance so that the students are capable of writing whether they are both in test performance and in regular practice. After all, the teachers have the responsibility to overcome this problem, and the students also have the duty to practice writing regularly.

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