

EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' WRITING DIFFICULTIES: FROM DIMENSIONS TO ERRORS

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore the students' writing difficulties examined from the five dimensions and common errors faced by students in Essay Writing Course. Descriptive research with explanatory design was employed in this study to investigate the students' writing difficulties which are analyzed from writing score and the sentence constructions in their cause-effect essay writing. This study purposively sampled 25 fourth semester students who join the Essay Writing Course. Essay Writing Tests (EWT) is used to get the data of students' writing. The results of data collection were in the forms of students' writing scores compared from each dimension (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics) and error analysis based on the word and sentential levels. The errors analyzed, then, were classified into error types. The results yielded that students' writing dimensions are between 2-3 points based on the scoring rubric which means they are still in basic and below basic writers. In addition, the most error types analyzed covered capitalization, punctuation, sentence fragments, spelling, subject-verb agreement, run-on sentences as literal translation from Indonesian, word choices, nouns, preposition, verbs, adjective, articles, word order, verb tense, passive voice, possessive ('s), and transition words. The result of study could be a basic data for the English teachers/lecturers to know the students' writing difficulties thoroughly from each dimension of writing and error types and further to assist them to write better.

Keywords: *writing difficulties, dimensions of writing, error analysis, essay writing*

Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi kesulitan mahasiswa dalam menulis yang akan diteliti melalui dimensi writing dan eror yang banyak dihadapi oleh mahasiswa dalam mata kuliah *Essay Writing*. Penelitian deskriptif dengan desain *explanatory* digunakan sebagai metode dalam penelitian ini untuk menginvestigasi kesulitan mahasiswa dalam menulis yang akan dianalisis dari nilai menulis dan konstruksi kalimat di dalam esai sebab-akibat. Secara purposive, sebanyak 25 mahasiswa semester empat yang mengikuti mata kuliah *Essay Writing* menjadi subjek dari penelitian ini. Tes Menulis Esai (EWT) digunakan untuk memperoleh data tulisan mahasiswa. Hasil dari pengumpulan data berbentuk nilai menulis mahasiswa yang dibandingkan dari lima dimensi mahasiswa yaitu (isi, organisasi, struktur bahasa, kosakata, dan aturan bahasa tertulis) and analisis eror pada level kata dan kalimat. Eror yang sudah dianalisa kemudian diklasifikasi berdasarkan tipe eror. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa dimensi menulis mahasiswa berada pada poin 2-3 berdasarkan rubrik penilaian yang berarti bahwa mahasiswa masih berada pada tingkat penulis dasar dan bawah dasar. Selain itu, eror yang banyak ditemukan dalam esai meliputi penulisan huruf kapital, tanda baca, kalimat tanpa subjek atau predikat, ejaan, persetujuan subjek-predikat, kalimat tidak efektif karena penerjemahan langsung dari Bahasa Indonesia, pemilihan kata, kata benda, kata depan, predikat, kata sifat, artikel, susunan kata, kalimat pasif, dan kepemilikan ('s). Hasil dari penelitian ini bisa menjadi data dasar bagi guru/dosen untuk mengetahui kesulitan-kesulitan mahasiswa dalam menulis secara menyeluruh dari dimensi menulis dan tipe-tipe eror dan selanjutnya untuk membantu mahasiswa menulis lebih baik.

Kata kunci: *kesulitan menulis, dimensi menulis, analisis error, menulis esai*

I. INTRODUCTION

The demand of the writing ability is elevated in higher education and professional requirement. Writing is considered one of the essential academic skills required in higher education, and its importance also increases as students' progress through their years of study (Casanave and Hubbard, 1992). According to

Hammann (2005) students' ability to present information and express their own ideas through writing plays an essential role in their academic and professional success. Academically, students are expected to write in a variety of styles, such as narrative, informative or persuasive, while simultaneously demonstrating their linguistic prowess through mastery of spelling, syntax,

grammar, capitalization, punctuation and organization of ideas (Feifer, 2013). On the other hand, writing itself is a productive skill which needs a complex process (Bruning & Horn, 2000) that makes most of ESL as well as EFL learners face difficulties in writing.

Students with writing difficulties in the process of writing often struggle with the written expression in writing. Flower and Hayes (1980) confirm that difficulties with written expression may describe struggles with one or more writing skills used in planning, composing, or revising. Graham (2006) adds that students with writing difficulties spend little time in critical writing processes, and tend to focus on low-level transcription skills such as handwriting, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. One critical skill involved in the writing and revising of text is sentence construction.

The writing difficulties deal with the students' struggles in the process of writing includes planning, organizing, and revising. Recent studies about the analysis of writing difficulties is strengthened by the study conducted by Hei and David (2015) about the case of postgraduates who do not have basic and advanced skills and literature review writing revealed that the postgraduates encompassed basic and advanced skills in reading and writing including 'not knowing what to read', 'how to read', 'how to start writing', 'organizing', 'doing a critical analysis', 'summarizing' and 'synthesizing'. The findings infer that most of the postgraduates still do not possess the necessary skills of reading and writing which are required in most postgraduate programs.

Writing difficulties are related to and often indicated by the error and mistakes made by the students in their writing performances. Recently, several studies still concern with the error analysis in EFL/ESL writing. Semsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakom (2017) conducted the study to examine the language errors in a writing of English major students in a Thai university and to explore the sources of the errors. The results yielded that the most frequently committed errors were punctuation, articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and fragment, respectively. Inter-lingual interference, intra-lingual interference, limited knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, and carelessness of the students were found to be the major sources of the errors.

Similarly, Phuket and Othman (2015) explored the major sources of errors occurred in

the writing of EFL students. They also investigated the types of errors that derived from two sources (inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors). The Results showed that the mostly frequent types of errors were translated words from Thai, word choice, verb tense, preposition, and comma. It was admitted that the most common source of errors was due to inter-lingual or native language interference.

Besides, Demirel (2017) examined errors in a corpus of 150 academic essays written by Turkish EFL students. The resulting categories consisted of mostly syntactic and lexical categories of error and also academic style errors. In terms of error categories, the most frequent errors were observed in the verb related error categories, noun modification and most it is related with interference.

Based on the results of studies above, the major source of errors is from L1 interference. A number of studies have concluded that most errors observed in learner written production are caused by L1 interference (Chuang and Nessi, 2006; Diez-Bedmar and Papp, 2008; Hawkins and Buttery, 2010).

This study aims to clear the ground what makes the students face difficulties in writing by investigating students' writing difficulties in the process of writing. The analysis completes the analyses both in the five dimensions of writing and the common errors in the word and sentential level that can cause the students have difficulties in writing. It is important to dig deeply what can cause students' writing difficulties to decide what solution and strategies that can be applied to overcome those problems.

Based on the background of the study regarding the importance of investigating the students' writing difficulties and writing apprehension in essay writing course, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How is the students' writing scores compared from the five dimensions of writing (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics)?
2. What are the error types found in students' writing performances?

II. RESEARCH METHOD

Altogether 25 fourth semester students of English major at a university were purposively selected. They were eight males and seventeen females whose age ranged from 20 to 22 years old. All of them have learned English as a foreign language for at least eight years.

To collect the data, EWT were administered twice to obtain the students' writing scores. 50 pieces of their written work were then analyzed to find the common errors made in the word and sentential levels. To seek for sources, unstructured interview were employed. Previous studies related to sources of errors in writing were also examined.

After the students had EWT twice, 50 pieces of writing were scored by the researchers. Each sentence was examined word by word. Each error was classified to its type in an individual error record form. Then, some of the students were interviewed randomly to obtain in-depth information about the sources they made in their writing.

The students' pieces of writing were scored from each dimensions starting from its content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. The each dimension was then compared to each other to find the students' strengths and weaknesses seen from the means of those five dimensions. The results of interview were analyzed and interpreted. Further, previous studies concerning to sources of errors was studied.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) Findings on Students' Essay Writing Test

Based on the data collection procedure in this study, essay writing tests were administered to the 25 students who have taken Essay Writing Course. The test was held twice each in 60 minutes and students were given several prompts (topics) to write the essay (see appendix 2). The students' essays were assessed by three raters using analytic scoring rubric adapted from Brown and Bailey (1984, in Brown, 2004:244-245) and also from Jacobs et al. (1981).

1. Inter-rater Reliability

The reliability coefficient between three different raters was calculated using Cronbach's alpha with SPSS 20.00. Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1.00, with values close to 1.00 indicating high consistency (Wells and Wollack, 2003:5). The statistical result yields that the reliability coefficient is .879 that can be categorized as high consistency. The computation of inter-rater reliability was shown in table 1

Table 1. Inter-rater Reliability Computation

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.879	10

2. The Results of Students' Essay Writing Test (EWT)

To answer the first question of this study, what students' writing difficulties found in their writing performances a statistical hypothesis was needed to score their essays. It aimed to investigate whether there was a significant difference between EWT 1 and EWT 2. The analysis used was Paired Sample T test. It has to be highlighted that the use of paired sample T test here was not to measure the difference caused by a certain treatment, but it is for measuring the consistency of students' writing performances observed in certain periods of time. This measured consistency ease the process to determine the difficulties faced by the students in writing.

In testing the hypothesis, the null as well as the alternative hypotheses were formulated. Here are the statements of both hypotheses:

Ho: There is no significant different in students' EWT 1 and EWT 2.

H1: There is significant different in students' EWT 1 and EWT 2.

Paired sample T test was run for the total score and the five dimensions of writing. The results are shown in table 2 and table 3.

Table 2. The Descriptive Statistic of Data

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
EWT 1	60,96	8,329	25
EWT 2	61,64	7,494	25

Table 3. The Result of Paired T test

Paired Samples Test				
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	EWT_1 - EWT_2	-1,019	24	,319

From the table 3.3 it yields that the means of both EWTs are quite similar. The mean of EWT 1 is 60.96 and the mean of EWT 2 is 61.64 with the difference between them is less than 1 point. The data is strengthened by the result of paired T test computation that the sig (2-tailed) is .319 (> 0.05). Since the result of paired T test is greater than .05, Ho is accepted that there is no significant difference between Essay Writing Test in session 1 and Essay Writing Test in

session 2. It means that the students' writing score are relative the same measured in a certain period of time. Thus, it helps to find the patterns of their writing performances and to examine what difficulties faced by the students in writing.

In depth, the analysis of the students' writing difficulties were measured from the five dimensions of writing; content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Therefore the five dimensions were measured and compared each other. Here is the comparison among the five dimensions of writing presented in the table 4.

Table 4. The Comparison of Five Dimensions of Writing

Dimensions	EWT 1	EWT 2
Content (30)	2,92	2,96
Organization (25)	3,12	3,2
Grammar (20)	2,76	2,76
Vocabulary (20)	3,4	3,36
Mechanics (20)	3,14	3,4

From table 4.4, it shows that every dimension of writing in EWT 1 as well as in EWT 2 scored between 2-3; less than 4 points. Referring to the scoring rubric, the students' level of English knowledge is still between basic and below basic. The means in the dimension of content (30) were 2.92 and 2.96, which means the students' essays contained a thesis that attempted to address the cause and effect prompt, but the writers provided some or even little clear, relevant evidence. The writers provided superficial explanation and some of them even failed to explain how evidence communicates what it does and/or justify inclusion.

The means of organization were 3.12 and 3.2, which mean that most of the students' essays followed a train of thought related to the thesis. The paper had an introduction and conclusion and the writer used some topic sentences and adequate transitions. However, in some essays, if not all, the thesis statements composed by the students were not effective, they might be too broad. Besides, they had stated the thesis statement but missing the conclusion. Table 3.5 also shows that both means of grammar in EWT 1 and 2 were 2.76. It means that many serious grammar problems interfere with the meaning of the sentences of the essay. There was grammar review needed in some areas. The sentences were difficult to read. Although the ideas were gotten by reading,

grammar problems were apparent and influence the meaning of the sentences and many run-on sentences were present.

The means of vocabulary were 3.4 and 3.36. It indicates that some vocabulary in students' essays was misused, the awareness of register was lack, and sometimes the structure was too wordy. The most problem faced by students in vocabulary was word choices or diction. Many words written were less appropriate with the context. The fifth dimension, mechanics had means 3.14 and 3.4. It admits that general writing conventions was used but had errors, spelling problems distracted reader, and punctuation errors interfere the ideas/meaning of the essay. In the writing performances held twice in EWT 1 and 2, none of the students had zero errors in mechanics. In fact, the mechanics still become problems in students' writing performances.

From the findings above, it reveals that most of the students have problems in the five dimensions of writing, starting from content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. The problems were due to students' limited knowledge of English, which influence them in generating their ideas, providing relevant, accurate and sufficient evidence, writing with precise grammar and diction, also producing acceptable English writing convention. Thus, the ranks from challenging the most from the five dimensions of writing respectively from the most challenging are grammar, content, organization, mechanics, and vocabulary.

Unstructured interview were also conducted to some students randomly to bear out the findings on this five dimensions of writing. Most of the students are confused how to jot down their ideas in English. Some of them write the essays in first language then translate them into English that such matter can interfere the language and meaning because of the different structure and parallelism between the two languages. In addition, less reading was to be found as one of the reasons why they face difficulties in providing relevant, adequate evidence and examples in composing essays.

3. Common Error Types

Although writing is not merely about error analysis, but in fact, errors are considered as the important mark of the language development in language learning. Thus, this study attempt to explore the common errors by the students to

find the patterns and map the whole puzzles of writing difficulties faced by the students. To support the findings on the five dimensions of writing above, all together 25 pieces of students' essay chosen randomly from EWT 1 and 2 were analyzed using the syntactical error analysis that were limited on the sentence constructions (word and sentential levels). The result of common error analysis is presented in table 5.

Table 5. The Classification, Frequency, Percentage, and Rank of Errors

Classifications of Errors	Frequency	Percent age	Rank
Errors at the sentential level			
Subject-verb agreement	34	5,83	6
Sentence Fragment	45	7,72	3
Verb Tense	9	1,54	14
Passive Voice	6	1,03	15
Word Order	10	1,72	13
Punctuation	113	19,38	2
Capitalization	128	21,96	1
Run-on Sentences as literal Translation from Indonesian	36	6,17	5
Errors at the word level			
Nouns	28	4,80	8
Verbs	27	4,63	9
Adjectives	15	2,57	11
Pronouns	3	0,51	18
Adverb	1	0,17	20
Preposition	27	4,63	10
Articles	15	2,57	12
Word choices	33	5,66	7
Spelling	42	7,20	4
Possessive 's	4	0,69	16
Quantifiers	3	0,51	19
Transition Words	4	0,69	17
Total	583	100	

Table 5 shows that the most errors committed by the students are respectively from capitalization, punctuation, sentence fragments, spelling, subject-verb agreement, run-on sentences as literal translation from Indonesian word choices, nouns, preposition, verbs, adjective, articles, word order, verb tense, passive voice, possessive 's, transition words, pronouns, quantifiers, and adverb. These common error types support the finding on grammar aspect in the previous discussion that the students have difficulties in constructing the sentences into acceptable essays. Based on the findings in EWTs, it can be said that the students

deal with the difficulties in five dimensions of writing covering from generating ideas, organizing, synthesizing, summarizing to constructing sentences.

Unstructured interviewed were also done to figure out the source of errors. Most of the students said that they were confused how to express the equivalent words from their first language to the target language, so they translate literally regardless the syntactical structure and the accepted meaning. The errors were also due to students' careless because the time limit in the writing tests.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that writing difficulties faced by the students covers almost all from the five dimensions of writing. The students struggle in generating ideas, formulating thesis statement, providing relevant evidence, data, and examples and also in sentence constructions. These difficulties faced might be due to the students' limited knowledge of English, less reading, students' careless, and the differences between the target language with the students' first language which influence their way of thinking or even interfere the way of constructing English sentences.

Knowing that most of the students face difficulties almost all from the five dimensions of writing, the teachers/lectures should assist them with the best strategies to compose better essays, providing valuable feedback, and make the right judgment in material selection and preparation.

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