

## Students' Challenges and Strategies in Writing English Essays at Pekalongan University

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### Abstract

Writing English essay is sometimes far from being easy. Many students have to write and revise their essays several times before they finalize them. With this phenomenon, the writers were interested in carrying out a research to find out the challenges faced by English language education students in writing essays and their strategies in writing at Pekalongan University. The research employed a qualitative method in which both questionnaire and interviews were used to collect the data. Thirty one respondents from various levels of English proficiency participated in completing the questionnaire and nine of them joined the interview. The findings show that students faced a number of challenges that affect the quality of their writing even though the majority claimed that their essay writing skills have been at intermediate level. Among the main challenges were difficulties in selecting appropriate vocabulary and in constructing effective sentences. Other challenges come from their difficulties in implementing grammar rules, in finding appropriate ideas and topics, and in translating Indonesian to English properly. In an effort to overcome these challenges, students used various strategies. Most of them chose to do more reading or finding references on essay writing to improve their understanding of how to write well. Modern technology was also utilized by a number of students in which they utilized the internet, apps, and artificial intelligence (AI) to support their writing process. In addition, asking friends or seeking feedback from peers was also a popular strategy.

**Key words:** essay, writing challenges, writing strategies

### Introduction

In the English language education department, writing skills are essential as they form a crucial part of language learning, particularly in mastering English. According to Hairuddin, et al. (2007 3.27), writing is the process of conveying messages in the form of written ideas, opinions, information and knowledge. Writing is a complex process involving cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis, as highlighted by Ridha (2012) in Rahmat's research (2023). Essay assignments are common in assessing students' writing skills. According to Zemach (2005) essay is a group of paragraphs which describe a particular topic and central main idea. The writing of essays demands complex skills, making it particularly hard for foreign students who find English the toughest to master, the challenges faced by Indonesian students in writing English essays are multifaceted and demand a comprehensive approach to support their improvement.

In writing English essay, students may face challenges. Supinah (2022:31) defines a challenge as a situation that tests one's ability to achieve goals, often pushing beyond comfort zones. In general, students have strategies for writing essays despite various challenges that they face. According to Djamarah and Zain

(2010) pedagogically, strategies are general patterns of teacher-student activities in both teaching and learning activities which are used to achieve the learning objectives.

This research aims to provide comprehensive insights into the challenges faced by English language education students in writing essays and to explore potential strategies to improve their proficiency. By investigating the specific difficulties that students encounter. The study will be an initial stage to identify effective teaching methods and resources that can better support students in improving their essay writing skills.

There are several previous studies that are related and have titles that are relevant to this current research to compare the similarities and differences between previous research and current research. The first study was done by Akbar (2019) entitled "Exploring Students' Writing Strategies in Essay Writing Class," which found that students set writing goals and generated ideas through reading in the pre-writing phase, ensured logical paragraph flow during writing, and corrected grammar post-writing. They also memorized English expressions from movies or books. The study concludes that students frequently use various

strategies, particularly English Writing Strategy Inventory questionnaire, and suggests lecturers to encourage and guide them.

The second study was a research conducted by Imaniah (2020) focusing on how students' critical thinking, habits of reading and, and grammar mastery correlated with their skills in writing essays. The study shows that English essay proficiency is dependent on those three factors. Critical thinking aids in deep analysis, coherent argument construction, and persuasive presentation. Reading habits expose students to diverse vocabulary and writing styles, enhancing their writing capabilities. Mastery of sentence structure ensures clarity, grammatical correctness, and idea fluidity in essays. These elements form a solid foundation for effective writing, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach to skill development.

The third research was done by Anggraeni (2022) entitled 'Problematics and Solutions for Academic Professional Writing: Student Perceptions'. Questionnaires and interviews were used as research instruments for collecting the data from 28 English undergraduate students who were taking professional writing courses. The results of this study show that there are 11 aspects that academic writing students find difficult to deal with related to the cohesion and coherence of their writing as well as problems related to the stages of academic writing.

Furthermore, the 4th research was conducted by Jocom (2022) entitled 'Student Perceptions of Writing Assignments in Academic and Contextual Written English Courses to Develop Writing Skills'. The research finds that the writing tasks in those courses meet students' needs effectively, receiving a positive reception. Students see these tasks as relevant and beneficial, supporting their academic goals and contextual learning requirements. This indicates successful integration of practical writing exercises that enhance skills and understanding, fostering a supportive learning environment appreciated by students for their academic growth.

The last, was a research by Rahmat (2023) entitled 'The Use of Grammar in English Essay Writing'. This research aimed to clarify students' grammar proficiency in writing English essays. Common grammatical errors were identified: nouns accounted for 32% of errors, followed by verbs at 28%, pronouns at 18%, prepositions at 12%, and adjectives at 10%. These findings pinpoint areas needing targeted instruction and practice to enhance overall writing proficiency. Previous studies outline common challenges students face in learning writing skills, including

essay writing. Their findings provide a robust foundation supporting the current research focus. Similar research methods or findings can enhance the rationale and validity of the ongoing study. This relationship deepens understanding and strengthens the reliability of future findings on related topics.

### **Methods**

Sugiyono (2013:2) defined research methods as the scientific ways in which data is obtained for a particular purpose. This current research employed a qualitative method to investigate the problems that students faced in writing essays in English and to know the strategies that students used to complete the English essays. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) qualitative research is a method for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups towards a social or human problem. The data is usually obtained from participant data collection. The data analysis is inductive from specific things to general, and researchers make interpretations about the meaning of data.

This research analyzed the 8th semester English Language Education department students' challenges and strategies in writing English essays at Pekalongan University using descriptive qualitative method. In this research, the data sources were thirty one students from the 8th semester of English language education department at Pekalongan University. The data were collected through the use of face-to-face structural interview and the use of questionnaire via Google Form.

### **Results & Discussion**

In this chapter, the researchers provided a comprehensive analysis of the responses addressing the problem statement regarding the challenges encountered and strategies employed by the eighth-semester students enrolled in the English Education Department when completing English essays.

First, the main findings of this current research relate to students' competence in writing essay. From the questionnaire, 56% or 16 students assessed their abilities as moderate, 25% of the respondents considered themselves as quite competent in mastering English essay writing skills and conversely, 22% of the students felt their abilities as lacking when it comes to writing English essays. This finding infers the students' challenges in writing essays as not all students regard themselves as competent.

The second finding relate to students' challenges in writing essays. Many students find it challenging to choose appropriate vocabulary

and phrases, with 48% of students highlighting this as a significant difficulty in writing English essays. Grammar issues follow, with 19% of students identifying it as a major challenge they must contend with. The selection of ideas and topics also poses a problem, with 13% of students indicating it as a hurdle in their essay writing process. Translation issues rank fourth, with 10% of students finding this aspect challenging. Additionally, 7% of students pointed to a lack of information and understanding of the essay content as a barrier, emphasizing the need for better research and comprehension skills. The least common challenge, cited by 3% of students, was the demand for adhering to a real structure in their writing, suggesting that while structural issues were less frequent, they were still a noteworthy obstacle for some students. Overall, these statistics highlight the various difficulties students encounter in writing English essays.

The third findings relate to the strategies which students used in overcoming the challenges. The finding shows that students employ various strategies to enhance their English essay writing skills. The majority, constituting 40% of responses, opted to increase their reading or reference materials as a key approach. Next, 22.5% of the students emphasized the utilization of technology in their writing process. Furthermore, 15% of respondents highlighted seeking feedback and suggestions from peers as a beneficial strategy. Another 10% focused on expanding their vocabulary, while 7.5% prioritized improving grammar proficiency. Additionally, 5% of students stressed the importance of effective time management when tackling essay assignments. These findings illustrate a range of tactics students employ to improve their English essay writing abilities, reflecting their diverse approaches and priorities in academic writing.

In addition, they mentioned that completing their essays typically takes them between 1 to 2 weeks, although the duration can vary based on the complexity of the topic and the type of essay they are tasked with writing. In addition, students also mentioned that the success rate of the strategy they used was around 80% and that it could be said to be successful. In the use of technology, students highlighted several websites and apps that assist them in completing their essays. The most commonly mentioned tools include Grammarly, Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT. Grammarly is frequently used for its ability to detect and correct grammatical errors, enhancing the overall quality of their writing. Google Translate and DeepL are

valuable for translating text and understanding complex vocabulary, facilitating better comprehension and expression in English. ChatGPT is utilized for generating ideas, structuring essays, and refining content, providing a versatile aid throughout the writing process. These technological tools collectively support students in overcoming language barriers, improving accuracy, and enhancing the coherence and sophistication of their essays.

## Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that students exhibit varying confidence levels in their essay writing abilities. They face challenges such as selecting appropriate vocabulary, handling grammar issues, and navigating idea development and translation complexities. To address these challenges, students employ strategies like increasing reading materials and using technology tools such as Grammarly, Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT to enhance accuracy and efficiency. Seeking peer feedback, expanding vocabulary, improving grammar, and managing time effectively are also common strategies reported. Overall, these approaches are perceived as effective in improving essay writing outcomes, despite varying durations required for completion based on topic complexity and essay type.

The findings of the research provide important information for the lecturers teaching Essay Writing Subject as the findings describe students' challenges in writing English essays. Lecturers may need to pay attention to these challenges and help the students to overcome them. However as the research was conducted only in one particular setting, the findings may not be generalizable and future researchers may need to explore this topic in various different settings so that wider picture about students' challenges and strategies in writing essays can be captured.

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