

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING EXPOSITORY ESSAY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ARTICLE INFO

Submitted : 2023-07-13
Revised : 2023-10-08
Accepted : 2023-10-20

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.33508/mgs.v51i2.4823>

ABSTRACT

Writing, one of the language skills, is considered difficult for some students, especially EFL students. The present research, a phenomenological study, aims to identify students' difficulties, factors affecting their difficulties, and strategies for overcoming their difficulties in writing expository essays. The participants were three students, taken using purposive sampling, from a private university in Surabaya. The instruments used in this study were observational fieldnotes, rubrics, Focus Group Discussion guidelines, and interview protocols. The research findings show that the participants had difficulties with the five components of writing: content, vocabulary, language use, mechanics, and organization. The common difficulties the participants faced were related to word choice, finding and developing ideas, verb tense, run-on sentences, spelling, punctuation, and writing thesis statements and topic sentences. There were internal and external factors that affected their difficulties, but most of them were internal. The most common factors were that the participants completed the assignments at the last minute or in a hurry, felt sleepy and lazy, and were afraid of plagiarism. They described some ways of overcoming their difficulties: finding more ideas and materials on the Internet, discussing the topic and content with their friends and lecturers, writing the ideas in Indonesian before translating them into English, using a common vocabulary, learning new vocabulary, finding the opposites and synonyms of some words, performing paraphrases, using grammar-checking tools, learning from the previous mistakes, paying more attention to the essay structure, making an outline, learning more basic English grammar, revising the mistakes based on the lecturer's feedback, and listening to music when writing the essays.

Keywords: *Writing, Writing difficulties, Expository essay, Phenomenological Study*

INTRODUCTION

English, a global and international language, is important to be learned by all people because it can be used to communicate, either spoken or written, with people worldwide. There are some reasons why English is necessary. According to Ilyosovna (2020), English can open career opportunities because it is the top language used in the Internet, business, and media industries. Besides that, English can also help someone travel abroad more easily, study all over the world, and understand many cultures. In Indonesia, English is a foreign language that is taught in schools, from kindergarten to higher education. In general, learning English means learning the four skills namely listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Listening and reading skills are receptive skills; speaking and writing skills are productive skills.

Out of the four language skills, writing is an important skill to be mastered. Learners need this skill to express something in written form. Similarly, Yarber (1989) states that through writing, someone could communicate his or her thoughts and feelings to others. In addition, Storch (2018, as cited in Jashari & Fojkar,

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2019) states that with the advanced technology and the usage of social media, people nowadays communicate with each other through writing. Moreover, Nacira (2010) states that writing skill is very important as it can help maintain social relationships among individuals through discourse. Knowing that writing skill is important to be taught to the students, teachers are expected to be able to guide the students to write good writing through various methods and techniques in teaching writing.

In general, there are some categories of writing: persuasive, narrative, descriptive, and expository. Each type of writing has its own purpose. According to Rozalinda et al. (2020), university students should be able to write expository essays, as it is the most common essay type that is usually written. In writing an expository essay, students need to investigate an idea, evaluate the evidence, either facts or opinions, expand the evidence on the main idea, and state their arguments rationally.

Writing an expository essay is not easy. Several studies showed how students had difficulties in writing expository essays. Pratiwi (2016), in her study, found that the most common writing difficulties faced by university students were linguistic difficulties (language use and vocabulary). In addition, cognitive difficulties (organization and mechanics) and physiology difficulties (content) were also considered difficult for them. Next, Ariyanti & Fitriana (2017) found that the English Department students had major problems related to grammatical, coherence, and cohesion terms. They also had minor issues related to paragraph organization, diction, and vocabulary misspellings. A study conducted by Natasya (2019), to find out the students' grammatical difficulties and their strategies in making a paper in Academic Writing class, found that the students had difficulties in making grammatical sentences, passive sentences, and choosing the correct sentence. To overcome their difficulties, they asked their friends, a lecturer, read other journals, and researched on the Internet. Budjalemba & Listyani (2020) found that there were external and internal factors that affected the students' difficulties in writing academic essays. The external factors were related to the teacher's style and method of teaching, classroom atmosphere, materials used, and the writing components. The internal factors, on the other hand, were related to the students' self-motivation, self-confidence, students' understanding of the materials, and the students' feelings during the writing process. Ashrafiyany et al. (2020), in their findings, showed that the students had difficulties finding the topic, constructing the thesis statement, and arranging their ideas into logical paragraphs. In addition, paragraph organization, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation were also considered difficult. The factors that affected their difficulties were not having enough understanding of expository essays and not having enough knowledge about the topic. Later, Bulqiyah et al. (2021) found that the students' difficulties were divided into two problems: affective and cognitive problems. Affective problems were related to students' manner and lecturers' teaching methods and styles during teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Besides that, the cognitive problems were related to the writing process, transferring language, lexico-grammar, vocabulary, and essay structure. Ramadhani et al. (2022), however, discovered that the university students that she researched were able to write expository essays because no one was at a poor level. Their writings were in the range of very good to average. Finally, Nenotek et al. (2022) found that students still had difficulties in writing academic essays related to content, organization, discourse, and mechanics. The dominant problems found were related to creating a thesis statement, finding and developing logical ideas, understanding the concept of the essay, writing the introduction, writing topic sentences, and citing references.

These studies have identified only two areas related to students' essay writing namely students' difficulties in writing essays and factors that contribute to students' difficulties in writing essays. How students overcome their writing difficulties has not yet been investigated. The current research, a phenomenological study, therefore, aims to find out the strategies students use to overcome their writing difficulties. Specifically, the research aims to find out the participants' difficulties in writing expository essays, the factors affecting their

difficulties in writing expository essays, and the strategies they used to overcome their difficulties in writing expository essays.

The results are expected to give the lecturers more insight into teaching expository writing, help to solve the students' writing problems, and provide a reference for researchers who are interested in doing research on a similar topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing

According to Nunan (2003), writing is a physical activity of putting words into the media, whether typed into a computer or written on paper using ink. Besides that, writing is a mental activity of finding ideas, and finding a way to express and organize them into clear and appropriate paragraphs. Furthermore, writing can be a process and product. Writing as a process is when the writer is thinking about big topics, organizing the main ideas, making a draft, editing, reading the writing, and then re-reading it. Meanwhile, writing is a product when the audience or the readers can read the final version.

A writer should follow the writing process in order to be able to produce final writing meaningfully and effectively. Moreover, Harmer (2004) states that there are four stages in the writing process. They are planning, drafting, editing, and final stage. In the planning stage, the writer should think about three considerations, such as the purpose, the audience, and the content structure of the writing. Next, in the drafting stage, the writer writes the first version of the writing. The writer may have more than one draft of writing before producing the final one. After that, in the editing stage, the writer should read the draft, reflect on it, and then revise it. The revision should be done based on the feedback, comments, and suggestions from the writer's self-reflection or other people. The writer may also add some more critical points. Finally, in the final version stage, the writer can produce the final version of the writing.

There are five essential components of writing: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (Hartfiel et al., 1985). Content is about the topic and ideas related to the subject. The organization is about the complete and logical development of the ideas. Vocabulary focuses on the word choice to state an appropriate tone and clarify the purpose. Language use is about the grammatical aspect of the writing. Mechanics is related to spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing.

Expository Essay

Yarber (1989) also states that an essay should include three parts: an introduction, body, and conclusion paragraph. Specifically, Expository essay is an essay that points out an idea, procedure, or information to the readers by analyzing, describing, and explaining its nature and significancy (Dunbar & Dunbar, 1989). Moreover, Yarber (1989) states that an expository essay has six patterns, as follows:

1. **Exemplification essay:** It is written to point out ideas that are supported by some examples.
2. **Process essay:** It explains how a process happens or how something is done chronologically.
3. **Classification essay:** It classifies a subject into some categories according to the similarities of the things or ideas.
4. **Definition essay:** It defines something in order to clear up confusion. There are three ways to define words: by a synonym, a formal definition, and an extended definition.
5. **Comparison-contrast essay:** It explains and evaluates things. When the writer analyses two or more things, comparison can point out the similarities and differences, while contrast can point out only the differences.
6. **Cause-effect essay:** It discusses why something happened and what will be the possible consequences

that might happen in the future.

Writing Difficulties

Based on the previous studies, it can be said that writing is still considered difficult for some students. Writing difficulties are the difficulties or problems that describe the learners' weaknesses, especially foreign learners who are studying writing in English (Phuong, 2021). In the research done by Alisha et al. (2019), it was found that the students had writing difficulties related to spelling, vocabulary mastery, and language used. Furthermore, Al-Khsawneh (2010, as cited in Christina, 2019) found some causes of writing problems. They were the teaching method and the environment, the lack of students' vocabulary mastery, and tense knowledge. In addition, the problems could happen because the students do not want to discuss their writings with their friends, they do not get appropriate feedback from the teachers, and they cannot differentiate how to read and write certain words.

Phenomenological Study

McMillan (2016) argues that a phenomenological study is a study that aims to describe, clarify, and interpret the lived experiences of participants in order to understand the core of their experiences. In addition, Creswell (2007) believes that a phenomenological study should not only contain a description but also an interpretation of the researcher.

There are two different approaches to a phenomenological study: Transcendental phenomenology and Hermeneutic phenomenology. The transcendental phenomenology was introduced by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). It focuses less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on the participants' experiences descriptions (Creswell, 2007). On another side, hermeneutic phenomenology was proposed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). According to Eddles-Hirsch (2015), Heidegger believes that it is impossible to set the researcher's beliefs aside because the researcher needs to be immersed in the phenomenon in order to have a better understanding of the experiences.

METHOD

This is a phenomenological study with hermeneutic approach. It emphasized the participants' perspectives as it researched based on the awareness of their own experiences. The most important thing in this study was understanding the participants' experiences and struggles in writing expository essays, and their strategies to solve the problems they faced.

The research participants were three students taking Writing Expository and Argumentative Essays Course at a private university in Surabaya, chosen by using purposive sampling. They were low achievers in the course who certainly had more difficulties in writing expository essays compared to middle-level achievers and high-level achievers. By doing in-depth and semi-structured focus group discussions to get their detailed experiences, the researcher wanted to discover their difficulties in writing expository essays, the factors affecting their difficulties, and their strategies to overcome their difficulties in writing. The following table represents the background of the participants.

Table 1. Summary of the Participants' Backgrounds

Subject	City of origins	First time learning English	First time writing in English	English exposure in writing
Participant 1	Kediri	Elementary school	First semester of college	Using mixed language in speaking or writing
Participant 2	Surabaya	Elementary school	Elementary school	Sometimes texting and speaking with classmates using English
Participant 3	Surabaya	Kindergarten	At young age (autodidact)	Using mixed language in speaking or writing

The data sources in this study were in the form of documents, discussions, and interviews. The documents consisted of reflective journals, Expository essays, observational fieldnotes, and interview transcripts. Additionally, there were also focus group discussions and interview recordings. The codes were divided into two: codes for the writing components and codes for factors that caused the difficulties. Then, the codes were identified more and described into broader themes. Next, the researcher made a mind map of the correlation between all the data that were interrelated to each theme and code, and then made assumptions on the phenomena. Last, the researcher wrote a summary of the analysis. Simply put, the data analysis technique of a phenomenological study is stated in Figure 1.

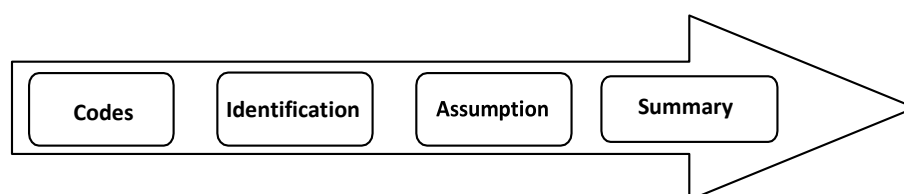


Figure 1. Data Analysis Technique

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part describes three essential themes in line with the three research questions: Students' difficulties in writing Expository essay, factors affecting students' difficulties in writing Expository essay, and the way the students overcame their difficulties in writing Expository essay. In addition, the writer also relates the current findings with the theories and findings of the previous studies.

Essential Theme 1: Students' Difficulties in Writing Expository Essay

In general, all research participants had difficulties in the five writing components. Regarding the content, all participants had a similar difficulty, which was related to finding and developing ideas to be written in their essays. Related to vocabulary, they had difficulty choosing words to avoid plagiarism. Regarding language use, all of them had difficulties in verb tenses and run-on sentences, while some of them had difficulties in word order, preposition, article, sentence fragment, sentence agreement, plural form, and question tags. For the mechanics, the participants had difficulties with spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and capitalization. Last, for the organization component, all participants had difficulties in writing a thesis sentence and topic sentences, while some of them had difficulties in citing references, writing based on the essay organization, and writing the title. These findings were in line with the findings of the study conducted by Pratiwi (2016), which also stated that the students had writing difficulties in those five writing components.

Essential Theme 2: Factors Affecting Students' Difficulties in Writing Expository Essay

Factors that affected the students' difficulties in writing expository essays were some internal factors and one external factor. The external factor was the class atmosphere. Whereas the internal factors were not focused during the teaching and learning process, not having enough understanding about the topic and materials, doing assignments at the last minute and in a hurry, being afraid of plagiarism, not rechecking the assignments, being confused about the essay criteria, being sloppy, not having self-confidence and self-motivation. The research findings related to the factors were in line with the findings of the studies done by Budjalemba & Listyani (2020) and Ashrafiany et al. (2020). Both studies also found that the factors that affected students' difficulties in writing were classroom atmosphere, students' self-motivation and self-confidence, students' understanding of the materials and feelings during class.

Essential theme 3: How the Students Overcame Their Difficulties in Writing Expository Essays

The participants had some similar and different ways of overcoming their difficulties in writing Expository essays.

- Based on the experience of Participant 1, for the content difficulties, she consulted the topic with the lecturer, tried to find more information on the Internet, and wrote the ideas in Indonesian before translating them into English. Besides that, she read more vocabulary to overcome her word choice difficulty. Regarding language use difficulties, she used Google Translate and Ms. Word to check her grammatical writing. Related to the mechanics, she also checked the errors in Microsoft Word and learned from her previous mistakes. Moreover, for organization, she paid more attention to the essay structure, wrote the thesis sentence first, and then made an outline.
- Based on the experience of Participant 2, he listened to music, searched for inspiration and ideas from the Internet, discussed with his friends, and did paraphrasing to overcome his content difficulties. For vocabulary difficulty, he preferred using more common vocabulary rather than formal ones. In addition, he also tried to learn new vocabulary. Moreover, for language use and mechanics difficulties, he used Grammarly and Microsoft Word and tried to learn more basic English grammar. Furthermore, related to organization difficulty, he consulted with the lecturer and revised based on the lecturer's feedback.
- Based on the experience of Participant 3, he browsed and read more related materials on the Internet for the content difficulties. Regarding vocabulary difficulty, he preferred not to use advanced and complicated vocabulary, tried to find the opposites and synonyms of some words, and then did paraphrase. Related to language use and mechanics difficulties, he used Microsoft Word and Grammarly to check his mechanical and grammatical errors. For organization difficulties, he discussed with his friends, copied his friend's essay template, revised based on the lecturer's feedback, and searched for more ideas and information on the Internet.

The participants' strategies for overcoming their difficulties were similar to the findings by Natasya (2019), whose study was about the students' strategies to overcome their grammatical difficulties in Academic Writing class. Her findings showed that to overcome the difficulties, the participants discussed with their friends, asked a lecturer, read other journals, and researched on the Internet. They were resembling to the findings of this current study in which the participants also asked the lecturer and friends, and searched for more information and ideas on the Internet.

CONCLUSION

It was found that the students struggled with all of the five writing components proposed by Hartfiel et al. (1985). Moreover, the researcher also found that the factors that affected the students' difficulties were internal and external, but most were internal. Mostly, they were affected by the factors that they always did the assignments at the last minute or in a hurry, felt lazy and sleepy, and were afraid of plagiarism. Furthermore, the students had their own strategies for overcoming their difficulties in writing an expository essay.

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