

PROBLEMS FACED BY INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS IN WRITING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

Wulan Rahmatunisa

Department of English Education, University of Kuningan, Indonesia

E-mail: wrahmatunisa@yahoo.com

APA Citation: Rahmatunisa, W. (2014). Problems faced by EFL learners in writing argumentative essay. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 3(1), 41-49

Received: 20-10-2014

Accepted: 05-11-2014

Published: 01-12-2014

Abstract: This study aims to find out problems in writing argumentative essay faced by Indonesian EFL learners. It is carried out in a qualitative research design as it attempted to describe the problems and their ways out. The data were taken from university students' writing task and interview. The participants are the second year of university Indonesia students who enrol their study in English Department. Results of the data indicated that Indonesian EFL learners faced the problems in three categories, those are linguistics problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. Mostly, students faced problems in linguistics related to the grammatical structure (23.2%), formatting words (30.2%), words classes (16.3%), error in using words (9.3%), and the use of article (21%). Second, cognitive problems are related to organizing paragraph, difficulties in remaining word classes, getting lost the generic structure, making a conclusion, and putting punctuation. Last, psychological problems which included laziness, egoism, bad mood, and difficulties to start writing also faced by Indonesian EFL learners. Data analysis also indicated the problem solving which hopefully will be beneficial for EFL teachers in writing class. It is strongly recommended that the EFL class should strengthen all the language skills in general and writing in particular, motivate the students to use English with the teachers, introduce pair work, peer-correction, and use dictionaries frequently etc.

Keywords: argumentative essay, linguistics problems, cognitive problems, psychological problems

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates problems faced by Indonesian EFL learners in writing argumentative essay. The reason for choosing this topic is triggered by some EFL students' opinion that writing is the most difficult skill in studying foreign language. Writing is not merely a skill we employ to record our knowledge, but the very moment at which we confront what learning and understanding are all about (Taylor, 2009).

Some researchers have argued that writing can be experienced as one of the

most difficult of all skills, requiring an intricate combination of neurological, physical, cognitive, and affective competencies (Murray et.al, 2006). It means that writer should analyze whether his/her writing is good and understandable or not. They have to arrange the words into good order, and make them aware that writing is different from speaking. That makes people said that writing is difficult activity.

In this study, writing argumentative essay is taken because it deals with set of assumption towards the issue.

Argumentative essay is also a challenging writing. When people start to make argumentative essay, they will ask to themselves what will the topic be and how they will organize it in words. Moreover, the goal of argumentative writing is to convince audience, and it is done in a situation where there exists a conflict between the beliefs and attitudes of the writer/speaker and reader/audience (Hyland, 2002). Thus, argumentative essay needs critical thinking and also great opinion so that readers will argue the writer's argument or believe that the opinion is true.

There are some studies conducting the issue about argumentative essay. Zhu (2001) investigated teachers in Mexico who identified process and strategies in writing argumentative essay. His study revealed that writing was the most complicated activity in language class and it became more difficult when came to foreign language class. The other study was conducted by Saito (2010). His research aimed to find out the major characteristics of students in third-year English in composing argumentative essay which were instructed by integrated-genre approach.

From the explanation above, a fundamental conclusion can be drawn: writing argumentative essay is highly important to be continuously and consistently done. By carefully considering this, in relation to critical EFL teaching, this study attempts to uncover problems faced by Indonesian EFL learners in writing argumentative essay. The formulations of this study are as follows: (1) What are the problems faced by EFL students in writing argumentative essay? (2) What do the students do to overcome the problems in writing argumentative essay?

Since this study is about problems faced by Indonesian EFL learners in writing argumentative essay, the weight and relevance are drawn. When students write an essay in their mother language, they do not find any significant difficulties such writing essay in foreign language. That is because English language learners have limited vocabulary. Therefore, students end up repeating the same words; this hinders creativity. Al-Khasawneh (2010), clarified that students couldn't give voice to their thoughts because lack the adequate stock of vocabulary. Moreover, English language learners don't use invented spelling and their written texts are restricted to words which they know. Therefore, by this study, new information can be proposed in EFL teaching in order to sharpen students' writing abilities.

Writing is an activity in which people transfer their ideas into written form. Kroll (1990) stated that writing is a complex, recursive, and creative process or set of behaviours that is similar in its broad outlines for first and second language writers. Writing also is a cognitive process because the process of writing is influenced by the task-environment and the writer's long term memory.

Writing is a long term activity. Generally, when people start to build the topic, they actually faced by some problems. Byrne (1995) stated that there are three problems raised; first, psychological problems, that writing is essentially a solitary activity and the fact that we are required to write on our own, without the possibility of interaction or the benefit of feedback, in itself makes the act of writing difficult. Second, linguistic problems, that in writing we have to compensate for the

absence of the features, keep the channel of communication open through our own effort and to ensure both through our choice of sentence structure and by the way our sentence are linked together and sequenced, that the text we produce can be interpreted on its own. Last, a cognitive problem, that writing is learned through a process of instruction. It means that we have to master the written form of the language and to learn certain structures which are important for effective communication in writing.

Mostly, we can write an essay easily when we write it in the mother tongue. Identifying and structuring the data are the easy process. But how do if we write in foreign language? It will be the different cases. Any problems will occur when we try to write in foreign language.

Daly (1997) mentioned that argumentative essay is built around a specific statement (or main premise) that is debatable within the field in which people are studying. Moreover, Bazerman (1985) stated that argumentative essay is responding to a text, the conclusion might recall the original idea to which people are responding, reminding the reader exactly what are agreeing or disagreeing. The content of argumentative essay is also has to be reasonable. Writer should organize their emotion when they attempt not too judge others.

There are two kinds of argumentative essay as stated in Gerot and Wignell (1995). Those are analytical exposition and hortatory exposition which have different function. Analytical exposition gives explanation to readers or listeners that something is the case, meanwhile hortatory has social function to persuade readers or listeners

that something should or should not be the case.

In fact, the fundamental problem in writing essay is we do not know how we can take the first statement. Thus it is important to organize first before we start to write. In argumentative essay there are three outlines used in writing including introduction (hook and thesis statement), body (argument 1, argument 2, argument 3), and conclusion (restated thesis statement)

No matter how writers organize the essay, they should make reader have same opinion to the essay and understand what the writers mean. This is one of the reasons why Indonesian EFL learners say that argumentative essay is difficult. Feedback is needed then, because it can help L2 writer get the best composing in the text. Hyland (2002) stated that feedback is important in acknowledging in process-based classrooms, where it forms a key element of the student's growing control over composing skills, and by genre-oriented teachers employing scaffolding learning techniques. Editing is other problem solving in writing. It also important because editing can help writer to know how if he/she is as reader from their writing. Writers are able to invite his/her friend to look at their work, or they can edit it by themselves.

There are three previous studies underlie this present research. The first research was done by Bakir, Al-Quds Open University in Nablus, Palestine, which title is "Writing Difficulties and New Solutions: Blended Learning as an Approach to Improve Writing Abilities" That study found that if a teacher keeps on teaching following the traditional method, the classroom activities become passive and monotonous. Therefore, the

teacher should try new methods other than the traditional methods of teaching and make the students better achievers. Bakir (2013) describes the teaching and learning context, and how the writing activities were integrated as part of the blended learning outcome. It discusses the extent to which students were able to achieve from the intended outcomes and the processes involved in achieving those outcomes. He reports findings from research into the benefits of integrating blended learning into traditional methods in developing writing abilities for second and third year undergraduates at a conventional university in Palestine.

While this present study will focus on problems appeared in writing an argumentative essay which is responding to a text, the conclusion might recall the original idea to which people are responding, reminding the reader exactly what are agreeing or disagreeing. Moreover this present study also examines the types of problems in term of linguistic, cognitive, and psychological problems.

Another related research report is conducted by Zhu (2001). He investigated teachers in Mexico who identified process and strategies in writing argumentative essay. His study revealed that writing was the most complicated activity in language class and it became more difficult when came to foreign language class. The other study was conducted by Saito (2010). His research aimed to find out the major characteristics of students in third-year English in composing argumentative essay which were instructed by integrated-genre approach.

From the explanation above, a fundamental conclusion can be drawn: writing argumentative essay is highly

important to be continuously and consistently done. By carefully considering this, in relation to critical EFL teaching, this study attempts to uncover problems faced by Indonesian EFL learners in writing argumentative essay.

METHOD

This study is going to be conducted in qualitative research design because it investigates a phenomenon described by Cresswell (1994) as an approach which inquires often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site or institution to interview or record in its natural setting.

The data sources of this study were taken from university students' writing task and interview. The participants are the second year of four university students who enrol their study in English Department and precisely they are EFL students in undergraduate study. Normally, they have learned argumentative essay and have ever written it.

The writing test was conducted to see students' argument towards a poem entitled 'Funny Face'. Here is the short poem written by Calvin Miller:

*FUNNY FACE by Calvin Miller
Suppose my nose were upside down:
In any rainstorm I might drown.
The sun would shine into my eyes
because my glasses sat so high.
One morning I'd hop out of bed
to find my mustache on my head.
And every time I'd sneeze or cough
the blast would blow my ball cap off.*

The data collection procedures of the qualitative method involve:

- (1) Setting the boundaries for the study, which lead to classify the participants in specific area.

- (2) Collecting information through observation, and
- (3) Establishing the protocol for recording information.

Participants' written task is the main data in this study. The data were taken at November 2013. The problems were analysed and classified based on the theory proposed. It will then be descriptively interpreted.

In this study, a ten-point scale was developed to evaluate each aspect, then the average of the scores was calculated. The breakdown of the marks of the areas covered is given below:

1. Structure: (2 points).
2. Spelling: (1 point).
3. Punctuation: (1 point).
4. Coherence: (2 points).
5. Cohesion: (1 point).
6. Strength of argument: (2 points).
7. Aesthetic dimension: (1 point).

In analyzing linguistic problems which occur in EFL students' writing, the percentage information will be drawn in a table in order to enrich the data presentation. The table will be as follow.

No.	Linguistics Problems	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Tenses		
2.	Word class		
3.	Word formation		
4.	The use of article		
5.	Word error		
Total			

Moreover, interview is used as the supporting instrument in collecting data. The semi-structured interviews were used in this study because they allow for standardized but in-depth probing of and elaboration on the original response. It enables one to follow a line of inquiry (Punch, 2001). The questions were prepared in advanced based on the theme being investigated. Most of the interviews were conducted in English. Nevertheless there were a number of occasions whereby Bahasa Indonesia is used as the respective respondents felt more comfortable using the language. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes, was audio-tapped and then transcribed by the interview as soon as possible, as suggested by Osborne and Freyberd (1985). Immediate transcription allowed the interviewers to improve technique of asking questions for the next interview.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the study and discussion result. It elucidates the writer's data analysis and discussion of the whole research. The chapter is divided into two major sections. The first section presents the findings of the study which answer what problems are faced by EFL learners and what they usually do in solving those problems. Then second section is about discussion.

The data, as outlined in chapter III, were obtained from writing test in order to see students' argument towards a poem entitled 'funny face' and from the interview. The data from the writing test are first presented and analyzed preceding by the data from the interview.

Based on the result of investigation, it is an evidence that there were found students who faced any difficulties in writing. To prove this fact, this study is provided by data analysis and interview

transcription to reveal the problems. The findings showed the coherence with Byrne (1995) who classified the problems in writing into three; those are

psychological problems, linguistics problems, and cognitive problems.

The following table shows the types of linguistics problems occur in students' writing.

No.	Linguistics Problems	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Tenses	10	23.2
2.	Word class	7	16.3
3.	Word formation	13	30.2
4.	The use of article	9	21
5.	Word error	4	9.3
	Total	43	100

Linguistics problems occur within structuring sentences such as tenses, word class, using articles, word formation, and word error. These problems typically can arise when L2 writer transfers his/her idea into L1 writer. The result of the investigation showed that different background is the main factor when students who learn L2, write their argumentative writing.

To solve those problems, students said they usually ask for feedback from teacher, do editing and revising, outlining, ask friends for being prove-reader, and read for improving their vocabulary. Those findings are consistent with Harmer (2007) who stated that the process of writing involves planning what we are going to write, drafting it, reviewing and editing what we have written and then producing a final (and satisfactory) version. It indicates that most EFL students have already done those principles. However, in order to maximize the result of learning process, they need to organize the problem solving in appropriate way and need more guidance from teachers.

Discussion

Cognitive problems relate to how to organize our ideas, using punctuation, addressing topic, following topic,

following instructions and directions.

The result of data analysis show that putting punctuation is the most problem faced by EFL students. This fact occurs because writing is not just expressing the idea but also organizing words. As mentioned before in Bakir (2013) who reports how the writing activities were integrated as part of the blended learning outcome.

Truly, word classes and word formation are the complicated one when writing an essay. This finding is also in line with the Rabab'ah (2003) who informed that the students are unable to express them appropriately in their writings due to their limited vocabulary: the result is that they cannot find appropriate and necessary vocabulary to express themselves. In fact, students still confuse when they have to compose complex sentences, especially if it comes to verbs plus appropriate preposition.

#25: *is on the same age with me*

Students still do mistakes in putting the appropriate preposition for each verb. The same mistake also happened in other student, who wrote:

#31: *similar with the title...*

The words which are bold should be replaced by 'as' and to, because the

appropriate preposition the word for the word 'same' is 'as' and 'to' for the word 'similar'.

In using grammar, students also found difficulties. They still confuse in determining which one is noun, verb, adverb, and adjective, as exemplified in students' writing test #23 and other sentences below.

#23: *it make him think positive*

#29: *the writer seems like talking to...*

From students' writing also found that they usually forget in mentioning a subject for each sentence. They merely mention a subject for a paragraph as exemplified below.

#9: *when talking about familiarity, build and make a familiarity to the readers more appropriately listeners by asking the listeners the listeners to suppose her or his funny face.*

The sentence above proved that students still use spoken form in writing essay. It also strongly indicates that most EFL mostly think as in their first language concept rather than think as native. As suggested by Harmer (2007) that many nationalities do not use the same kind of script as English, so for students from those cultures, writing in English is doubly difficult: they are fighting to express themselves at the same time as trying (when they are not using a computer keyboard) to work out a completely new writing system.

Data from the interview revealed some problems students faced in writing argumentative essay. They mostly agree that organizing paragraph is difficult as expressed by 4 students exemplified below.

Students#4: *'I do not like to write a draft because when it comes to my real writing I usually write out of the draft'*

These findings are in line with the causes of writing problems reported by

Al-Khasawneh (2010) who concluded that insufficient opportunities of using English and inappropriate teaching methods were the major causes identified by the participants of the study as the major factors of their writing problems. The least important reasons identified by the participants for their weak writing were their low English proficiency, teachers' lack of interest in writing tasks and insufficient use of dictionaries.

Basically, writing a draft firstly can help writer in writing an essay. Draft is a map for writers. When writer lost their way, the draft will help them to come back to the topic. The statement above also indicates other psychological problem in writing that is laziness. Difficulty to start writing is another problem related to psychological problem in writing. This is expressed by all participants as they stated that writing basically needs a lot of time to prepare. They said it covers plan, draft, re-plan, draft, edit, re-edit, re-plan, etc before they produce their final version.

Students do not write very often and most of what they write is classroom-bound. As Bakir (2013) mentioned the most important factor in writing exercises is that students need to be personally involved in order to make the learning experience of great value. Encouraging student participation in the exercise, while at the same time refining and expanding writing skills, requires a certain pragmatic approach. The teacher should be clear on what skills he/she is trying to develop. Next, the teacher needs to decide on which type of exercise can facilitate learning of the target area. Once the target skill areas and means of implementation are defined, the teacher can then proceed to focus on what topic can be employed to

ensure student participation. By pragmatically combining these objectives, the teacher can expect both enthusiasm and effective learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the problems which are faced by some EFL students in writing argumentative essay. Results of the data indicated that students faced the problems in three categories, those are linguistics problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. Mostly, students faced problems in linguistics related to the grammatical structure (23.2%), formatting words (30.2%), words classes (16.3%), error in using words (9.3%), and the use of article (21%). Second, cognitive problems are related to organizing paragraph, difficulties in remaining word classes, getting lost the generic structure, making a conclusion, and putting punctuation. Last, Psychological problems which included laziness, egoism, bad mood, and difficulties to start writing are also faced by EFL students.

This study also answers the second research question of what the students do to overcome the problems in writing argumentative essay. The interview session revealed students usually ask for feedback from teacher or lecturer, do editing and revising, outlining, ask friends for being prove-reader, and read more for improving their vocabulary. Those findings are consistent with Harmer (2007) who stated that the process of writing involves planning what we are going to write, drafting it, reviewing and editing what we have written and then producing a final (and satisfactory) version.

What this recent study shows, then, is that the current reality in EFL classes

still falls far short of the goal of English Language Teaching. Even though most of EFL classes use the standard criteria of EFL teaching, it cannot serve as a resource for improving language education as it exists now for shaping our thinking as we design curriculum and materials for the future. Teachers need to identify the learning preferences and learning styles of their students. The understanding of how best the students learn then is matched with pedagogical approaches deemed appropriate for learning to take place at optimal level. Moreover, students should be challenged with tasks and projects of varying level of difficulty. They need to discover issues and uncover answers by themselves. Furthermore, teachers should understand what motivates the students in class, because students need to be motivated to keep them alert.

REFERENCES

- Al-Khasawneh, F. (2010). Writing for academic purposes: Problems faced by Arab postgraduate students of the college of business, UUM. *ESL World*, 9 (2).
- Bakir. (2013). Writing difficulties and new solutions: Blended learning as an approach to improve writing abilities. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3(9).
- Bazerman, C. (1985). *The informed writer: Using source in discipline*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Byrne, D. (1995). *Teaching writing skills*. Singapore: Longman Publisher.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London: Sage Publisher.
- Daly, B. (1997). *Writing argumentative essay*. Retrieved from <http://www.eslplanet.com/teachertools/arguweb/preface>
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching*. Malaysia: Pearson Education Limited.

- Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. London: Pearson Education.
- Krappels. (1999). *An overview of second language writing process research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kroll, B. (1990). *Second language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Murray, R. & Moore, S. (2006). *The handbook of academic writing*. New York: Open University Press.
- Osborne, R. J., & Freyberg, P. S. (1985) *Learning in science: The implications of children's science*. Auckland: Heinemann.
- Punch, K. F. (2001) *Introduction to social research quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rababah, G. (2003). *Communication problems facing Arab learners of English: A personal perspective*. *TEFL Web Journal*, 2(1).
- Saito, S. (2010). *An analysis of argumentative essay of Thai third-year English majors instructed by integrated process-genre based approach*. A Thesis: Bangkok.
- Taylor, G. (2009). *A student's writing guides*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhu, W. (2001). Performing argumentative writing in English: Difficulties, processes, and strategies. *TESL Canada Journal* 19 (1).