

“I GOT STUCK NOT ONLY IN THE FIRST ESSAY”: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY ON STUDENTS’ WRITING DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT

Writing, one of the language skills, seems to be the most difficult skill for students to master. There are five aspects used to evaluate students’ writing abilities: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. This current narrative inquiry research aims to find out students’ difficulties in writing expository essays, the factors that cause them to have difficulties, and the strategies they use to overcome them. The data of this research were taken from the students taking Writing Expository and Argumentative Essays course in the English Department of Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University. The data of this study were collected from interviews, observations, and documents. Three participants with middle-achievement levels were interviewed in three interview sessions, and observations in the writing class were conducted two times. Besides, two essays of each participant were analyzed. The findings show that in relation to the five writing aspects, the major difficulty that the participants had was in the content aspect. Then, the common factor that caused all of the participants to have difficulties was a lack of reading habit. Besides, the common strategy that all participants used to overcome their difficulties was to search on Google.

Keywords: *writing, writing aspects, writing difficulties, expository essays, narrative inquiry*

INTRODUCTION

English is an important international language; it is used to communicate with people all around the world. Though in Indonesia, English is a foreign language, it is indeed necessary to master it as a communication tool. There are four skills to develop in learning English: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Though writing seems to be the most difficult for students to master, Harmer (2004) believes that the ability to write is a necessary skill for foreign language learners. Elbow (1998) adds that writing is a time-consuming and complicated skill in a language. Writing is considered difficult because it requires students to apply English grammar and mechanics rules properly in their writing (Sari et al., 2018). Moreover, the different grammar rules often cause students to make mistakes in translating their ideas from Indonesian to English.

There are many types of essays that students have to write. Exposition is one type which students usually have trouble in writing. In writing an expository essay, clear ideas, definitions, and examples are the elements needed to produce a good expository essay (Richard, 2016). Several studies regarding the students’ difficulties in writing expository essays have been conducted. Munawwaroh (2014), in her study, revealed that students had problems in understanding background knowledge of the topic, identifying the main idea, and using correct grammar and mechanics. Next, Alfuruqy et al. (2022) found that students often make errors in grammar,

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mechanics, and vocabulary in writing expository essays. These studies indicate that writing expository essays appears to be difficult for students.

To learn more deeply about students' problems in writing expository essays, this paper, using a narrative-inquiry design, tries to discover students' main stories about their difficulties in writing expository essays. Therefore, the research problems are formulated as follows:

1. What are the students' main stories about their difficulties in writing expository essays?
2. What are the students' main stories about the factors that cause them to struggle with writing expository essays?
3. What are the students' main stories about their strategies for overcoming their difficulties in writing expository essays?

The research findings are expected to contribute ideas to solve students' problems in writing expository essays.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a study through stories of how human experiences the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). According to Josselson (2007), a narrative inquirer must obey the ethical principles in narrative research: a narrative inquirer has to state the contract of an interview to the participants, a narrative inquirer has to protect the privacy of the participants, and a narrative inquirer has to invite participants' reflections on the experience of being a participant in the study. In addition, as stated by McMillan (2016), there are six characteristics of a narrative inquiry: continuity of experience, use of several data sources, emphasis on context and situation, exploration of identity formation, emphasis on "turning point", and collaborative relationship. A narrative-inquiry allows a researcher to investigate how humans experience the world through their stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Writing Difficulties

Harmer (2004) states that there are four elements of a writing process: planning, drafting, editing, and the final stage. Besides, there are five components of writing: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (Jacobs et al., 1981).

Writing difficulties are problems that learners encounter in the writing process (Wen, 2007, as cited in Phuong, 2021). Every writing component has its own difficulties. According to Hyland (2003), content refers to the themes or topics that the writers are interested to write. It is important for the writer to have knowledge about the topics they are going to write. The unfamiliarity with writing topics causes the writers to experience difficulties in planning and writing their texts (Rofiqoh et al., 2022). Organization refers to how the information is organized: whole-to-whole, similarities-to-differences, or point-by-point structures (Toba et al., 2019). Besides, every piece of information presented should be connected with the appropriate transition signals. According to Kristiana et al. (2019), the organization of ideas is the key factor in writing. In writing, however, writers often face difficulties in relating one idea with another idea. Next, vocabulary is one of the important tools in expressing ideas. It plays a vital role in the success of the written communication. However, it is difficult for students to spell long-syllable words, and use proper diction in writing. Then, language use refers to the use of grammatical and syntactic structure in writing. According to Than and Doan (2010), grammar is a set of rules in a language that should be mastered. Inappropriate language use will give readers unclear meanings. Yuliawati (2021) states that writers are more aware of the idea and content rather than the mechanics of their writing. However, good writing requires

not only idea and content but also mechanics. Misspelled words or inappropriate words will create ambiguity in the sentences.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative method called narrative inquiry. The researcher attempted to comprehend participants' experiences through the stories they told rather than purely finding answers to the research questions. Purposive sampling was used to take three middle-achievement level students taking Writing Expository and Argumentative Essays course as the participants of the research.

Table 1 represents the participants' backgrounds from their elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school.

Table 1. Summary of the Participants' Backgrounds

Participant	Hometown	Language Used at Home	Language Used at School	First Time Learning English	First Time Writing in English
Participant 1	Larantuka	Lamaholot	Indonesian and Lamaholot	Elementary school	Junior high school
Participant 2	Surabaya	Indonesian, Javanese, and Hokkien	Indonesian and Javanese	Kindergarten	Junior high school
Participant 3	Surabaya	Indonesian and Javanese	Indonesian and Javanese	Elementary school	Elementary school

Middle-achievement students are students who encounter a considerable number of problems but are able to solve some of them. Besides, they are seen as students who reflect the majority of the students.

The instruments used to collect the data were interview protocols and observational field notes. In conducting the interviews, the interview protocols was used as a guide. In the interviews, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions were used to obtain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. In conducting the observations, observation field notes was used to obtain classroom observation data. In addition, the participants' first and last expository essays were collected to be analyzed.

In analyzing the data obtained from the interviews, thematic analysis was applied to recognize the thematic headings: participants' difficulties in writing expository essays, the factors that cause them to have difficulties, and how they overcame their difficulties. In analyzing the observational field notes, reflective notes were written to record the researcher's personal thoughts about the descriptive notes. Lastly, the participants' first and last expository essays were analyzed related to the five writing components. In maintaining the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher used members checking and triangulation.

The results showed that the major difficulty experienced by all of the participants was related to the content aspect. In relation to content, Participant 1, sharing that she got stuck in thinking about what to put in her essays, stated:

"Uhm I had. For example, I had the first benefit- I had. I once got stuck. For example, 'What is the content of this paragraph?' I suddenly lost the idea."

Participant 2, believing that she had difficulties in explaining the body paragraphs of her essays, said:

"I got stuck not only in the first essay. For the next essays, I also got stuck in the body part. I did not know what to explain in the first, second, and third body paragraphs. For example, if I wanted to explain about the advantages and disadvantages, 'What is the third then?' I always got confused about that."

Participant 3, facing problems in writing the introduction and the body paragraphs in his essays, explained:

"I had. So- uhm the thing that caused me to get stuck the most was I got confused about what I should talk about. What should be written. For example, I usually got stuck in the beginning. I usually got stuck in the body paragraph because I wanted to talk about these things."

In the organization aspect, Participant 1 experienced difficulty because she did not create an outline for her essay. However, after creating an outline for her next essay, she had no difficulties in the organization aspect. Retelling her experience, she said:

"After using an outline, it was like- I did not get stuck anymore."

Participant 2, feeling certain that it was difficult for her to determine where to place the ideas in her essays, explained:

"What made it difficult was that the idea and the organize- uhm where should this be put, where this should be explained, what should be explained here."

In contrast to Participant 1 and Participant 2, Participant 3 believed that he never got stuck in the organization of the essay since he already knew the main thing of the essay, namely the essay structure that consists of introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. He stated:

"When I arrange it, the main thing was that I should have introduction in the first paragraph, conclusion in the last paragraph, and in the middle, it would be the body paragraphs. I know the main thing. So, I did not face difficulties while arranging them."

Regarding to the vocabulary aspect, Participant 1, admitting that she used only basic vocabulary in her essays because of her limited vocabulary repertoire, explained:

"That was probably because- for example, the first problem earlier. When I wanted to compose an essay, I composed it in Indonesian first. When I wanted to translate it, sometimes I did not know many vocabulary. There were vocabulary in English that I did not know. That caused me to get stuck."

Participant 2, having the same opinion as Participant 1, said:

"Uhm for the vocabulary words, I honestly was not that smart because my vocabulary was also limited."

Participant 3 faced difficulties in choosing the vocabulary because he did not know the English translation of the word. He said:

"Yes. Sometimes. For example, I did not know the English translation. However, it did not last long. After that, I looked for the English translation."

In relation to the language use, Participant 1 admitted that even though she had the ideas in her Indonesian essays, she still faced difficulties in presenting them in English. She explained:

"I have thought about it. For example, 'Oh right I will write about this content.' However, later, I got confused about what kind of words I had to use when writing. Like the way to use the sentence. However, the ideas were already in my mind. I have already thought about the content, but it was difficult to pour the ideas into writing."

Participant 2, experiencing the same thing as Participant 1, said:

"I have. That usually happened. That was why when I already remembered what to write, but that part was still far away from the part that I was doing, then I listed it first. I put it on a note first. 'Oh later I want to write about these.' Like that."

Participant 3, sharing that he had difficulties to present the sentences even though he knew what he wanted to talk about in his essays, said:

"Oh I have. I have arranged in my mind about what I wanted to talk about. For example, one point. However, it was difficult for me to arrange the sentence even though I already knew what I wanted to talk about. It was difficult for me to write it. I sometimes experienced that."

In the context of mechanics, Participant 1, believing that she had difficulties in spelling some English words, said:

"Uhm the spelling is like that. For example, there were words that I did not know, then I had to look for how they should be written. I read again."

Participant 2 experienced difficulties in using correct punctuation marks in her essays. She explained:

"I have ever got stuck. For example- uhm 'After conjunction, does it have to be a comma or not?' Then- uhm 'For the dash, do I have to use it?' Then, 'Is it period already? Or can I put comma?' Like that."

Participant 3, however, feeling certain that he did not have any difficulties in spelling, capitalization, or punctuation marks, said:

"Uhm for the spelling, no. Because there was Google already. Well, it does not have to be Google. For example, in Word, if the spelling is wrong, a red line below the word will usually appear, then 'This must be wrong.' It could usually be directly corrected."

"For the capitalization, no. Because in this essay, I knew that the capitalization must be in the first sentence of first paragraph. After a period or a person's name, I should use capital letters."

"No problems with punctuation marks."

Next, the experiences told by the participants lead to the finding of the factors causing all of their difficulties. Participant 1 assumed that she experienced difficulties in writing because she did not read enough. Besides, she also thought that she lacked writing practice, still used her local language, felt sleepy while writing her essays, and lost focus. She explained:

"I think because of this (referring to the reason why she got stuck in the content). One of them maybe because I did not read enough. Less reading, less writing practice. Uhm I think the difficulties in composing essays are due to lack of writing practice, lack of reading information. Then I sometimes still used my local language because when I was in my hometown, I used the local language more than Indonesian. I think that is also one of the reasons why I got confused about what language to use when I composed an essay."

"It was probably because I was not focused."

Participant 2 speculated that she had limited knowledge about the writing topic. Besides, she added that she also had limited vocabulary and the noisy situation made her could not think about what she wanted to write in her essays. She said:

"Uhm that was because I was not good at creating sentences, and maybe because my knowledge was limited if I were asked to compose things like this."

"Uhm yeah because my words were limited too."

"From outside myself, no. Maybe it was just, for example, the situation was noisy. So, I could not think. That is it. That is all. I think that is a common thing."

Participant 3 was certain that the difficulties happened because he rarely read the materials related to his essay topic. Besides, he had limited vocabulary. He explained:

"Uhm maybe because I also rarely read about the materials that I wanted to look for."

"Uhm it was because I did not have enough vocabulary."

The common factor of the participants' problems seemed to be related to their lack of reading habit. Concerning the common strategy they used to overcome their difficulties, Participant 1 shared that she stopped to take a rest and used the internet to read from several sources to get ideas. She said:

"I stopped- I stopped for a while. I took a rest like eating something, then continued it again. I continued it once I got the ideas."

"Sometimes, I used Google Translate, the translation website to see the correctness of the meaning."

"Usually in Google."

"I tried to find it again by reading from several sources."

Participant 2 just wrote what she wanted, used the internet to look for the facts needed for her essay, used her feelings, and took a break. She mentioned:

"When I got stuck, I usually wrote freely. Therefore, here, maybe there were some sentences that are not connected to each other. Because if I got stuck, then I just added things to make it longer."
"That one is for the third body. The one about the child nutrition. I only looked for that on the internet."
"Actually, I had to check it in Grammarly. However, since I was lazy to check in Grammarly, I used my feelings. Like, 'Oh I think this should be V2.' Then, I changed it into V2. 'Oh this should use s.' Then I added s. Using feeling."
"The thing that I did the most was to take a break first. Because I think, when my brain is tired, then I cannot think anymore. There were no more ideas."

Participant 3 used the internet, stopped for a while, and skipped the paragraph, and used spell-check feature. He explained:

"Oh. Usually- uhm this is for me. For the main points, I searched them on Google first. Uhm- in Google Translate."
"Uhm I stopped for a while. Or for example, if I got confused about what to talk about in the body paragraph, then I just skipped it first. I would continue it later. I continued it first to the next one, which is the body paragraph 2."
"Because I still used Microsoft Word, when the spelling is wrong, there would be a line below the word. So, I could directly correct it."

Their stories reveal that they were searching on *Google* as a strategy to overcome their difficulties.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis on the participants' main stories about writing expository essays reveal their difficulties, the factors that cause them to have the difficulties, and their strategies for overcoming their difficulties. The results show the major difficulty experienced by all of the participants was related to the content aspect. Even though different factors were causing them to have this difficulty, they seemed to share a common factor, which is a lack of reading habits. Lastly, the participants used different strategies to overcome their writing difficulties; however, the common strategy that they used was searching on *Google*. The document analysis results, however, reveal that in addition to the content aspect, these participants also had trouble in the other writing aspects: organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

Concerning the problem with the content aspect which was experienced by the participants, this result is similar to that found by Toba et al. (2019) that difficulty in the content aspect is related to the irrelevant idea with the topic, limited idea, and occasionally unknowledgeable idea. In addition, according to Hyland (2003), content is related to the themes or topics that the writers are interested to write. As a result, having knowledge of the topics is necessary since the knowledge will be used as the basic foundation to construct a writing.

The finding revealed that the common factor causing all of the participants to have the difficulties was related to their lack of reading habits. Lack of reading caused them to have limited knowledge of the topics. The factor with lack of reading is supported by Rofiqoh et al. (2022) who state that the unfamiliarity with writing topics causes the writers to experience difficulties in planning and writing their texts. The topic familiarity affects students in writing their essays. Students who do not have strong familiarity with the topics will be at disadvantage (Hyland, 2003). They will have problems in elaborating the ideas related to the topics. However, students who have knowledge about the topic will have less difficulty in writing their essays. In addition, He and Shi (2012) state that students performed better with a familiar topic in writing their essays.

The findings presented that the research participants have some strategies for overcoming their difficulties in writing expository essays. Though all of the participants had several ways to overcome their difficulties, their stories indicated that the common strategy used to overcome the difficulties was by searching on *Google*. The use of *Google* to overcome writing difficulties is in line with Malloy and Gambrell (2006) who believed that the internet exemplifies literacy that engages readers of any age and capabilities. To be able to write an essay means that students should have adequate knowledge of the writing topic. As a result, students have to

read from many sources related to the writing topics before and while they are writing. As a digital library, *Google* was used by all of the participants to explore the information. This enables the participants to discover rich knowledge related to their writing topics.

CONCLUSION

The research findings describe that the major difficulty faced by students in writing expository essays is related to the content aspect. In relation to the content, the students experienced difficulties in deciding what to discuss in their essays. Next, the common factor that caused students to struggle with writing expository essays was a lack of reading. Lack of reading causes them to have difficulties with the content since they had limited knowledge about their writing topics. In overcoming the difficulty, the common strategy they used was by searching on *Google*. By searching on *Google*, they could search for more information related to their writing topics.

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