Student Writers' Academic Essay Writing Problems: Students' and Teachers' Responses

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed at investigating the student writers' problems in writing academic essay viewed from students and teachers. The rational is that the ability to write academic essays benefits students at Indonesian Language of Education, Universitas Negeri Padang for academic and career needs as teachers. This descriptive study analyzed the data gained from the questionnaires distributed to 38 students, the native speakers of Indonesian writing academic essay in Indonesian language and 7 teachers teaching Indonesian Language. They were about students' difficulties on prewriting, coherence, cohesion, lexicon, and mechanics which were elaborated into 23 items (devices). The findings indicated that in prewriting, the students experienced difficulty most on planning unfamiliar topics, while teachers responded that generating relevant and consistent ideas was difficult for students. In coherence, both students and teachers agreed that developing main idea into complete paragraphs was the main problems for students. In cohesion, students and teachers responded differently. Students experienced that using ellipsis was the most difficult one, while teachers found that writing a good introduction to the essay and developing main idea into complete paragraphs was the most difficult for the students. In lexical, the teachers' and students 'responses were the same. Using idioms and word collocations was the most difficult one for students. In mechanics, the teachers and the students responded differently. The students experienced writing grammatically correct sentences was the most difficult one, but the teachers identified that using punctuation was the main problem for the students. Overall, those findings indicated some areas of improvement in teaching academic essay.
Keywords: student writer, academic essay writing problems, responses

1. INTRODUCTION

Essay writing is essential for university students. Their knowledge and understanding are largely exhibited and valued by the quality of essays they write by Coffin, et al. [1] and by Crème and Lea [2]. The ability to writing an essay is also necessary to get scholarship to pursue higher education. *Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan* (LPDP) in Indonesia [3] requires all applicants who want to pursue higher education by the scholarship offered to submit an essay. The more qualified essay the applicants write, the bigger opportunity they get the scholarship to continue to higher education- master degree and Ph.d programs. Therefore, how to produce a qualified essay should be learned at university.

However, some researchers proved that writing essays is still a problem for college or university students. Hinkel [4] found out that student writers experience a great deal of difficulty in writing essays in their study at the college or university level. Negari [5] and Hammad [6] found out

in their studies that writing essay was the most difficult language skill for learners.

What problems students encounter in writing essays have given considerable attention to language teaching. Trang and Hoa [7] found that Vietnamese students faced three problems in essay writing. First, they spent more time on planning what to write. As the result, they spent few days to decide what to write. Second, as they had already known what to write, they revised more at the word and phrase levels. Third, they spent more time finding the most effective way to write the essays. Sarfraz [8] identified that that majority of errors were grammatical and misspelling errors resulting from interlanguage process. Though, the participants were taught grammar previously, they were lack of practice and positive feedback to the development of their essays. The reasons for these errors were carelessness and lack of practice. Gustilo and Magno [9] figured out that the use of inappropriate use of word choice and capitalization significantly decreased essay scores. Javid and Umer [10] reported learners had serious problems in their academic writing due to their weaknesses in using appropriate lexical items, organization of ideas and grammar. The

other weaker areas included wrong use of prepositions, spellings, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, suffixes and prefixes.

The findings above reveal that student writers encounter difficulties in what to write and have offered valuable insights into the reasons of investigating essay writing difficulties faced by the students who had enrolled *keterampilan Menulis* course. Students' problems can be solved by investigating: (1) students' difficulties on writing Indonesian academic essays from students' responses, and (2) students' difficulties on writing Indonesian academic essays from teachers' responses.

1.1. Related Work

According to the generation type of assumptions, we divided the existed work into two categories.

1.1.1. Essay Writing

An essay, one type of writings, is a short composition containing at least three paragraphs - of introduction, main body, and conclusion- Zemack and Rumisex [11] and Legnerová [12] which develop main idea of the essay called thesis statement Bailey [13]. The quality of the essay is determined by cohesion, coherence, lexicon, and mechanics Hinkle [4]; Zemack & Rumisex [11]. Cohesion and coherent are two determinant factors that determine a readable essay. Coherence presents the organizational pattern which is well organized in logical and clear flow of thought Hinkle [4]; Zemack & Rumisex [11]. Cohesion means connecting ideas between sentences, paragraphs, the essay, Hinkel [4]. Lexicon is the choice words Gustilo and Magno [9]. Mechanics is the use of language structure correctly Ahmed [14]; Gustilo and Magno [9]. In sum, an academic essay, one of written and short composition containing a group of at least three related paragraphs developing one thesis statement. An essay is classified into introduction, body, and conclusion. These indicators, cohesion, coherence, lexicon, and mechanics unquestionably make a good academic essay.

1.1.2. Essay Writing Difficulties

1.1.2.1. Prewriting Difficulties.

Prewriting is considered as an essential part of the writing process, but it would be difficult. The difficulties present obstacle for the whole essay since it is time to get started. The terms 'planning' and 'prewriting' have been interchangeably used in the literature. The difficulties are to choose the topic for their writing, to generate relevant and consistent ideas to their topics, to plan interesting and relevant topics and to stimulate ideas for unfamiliar topics assigned by teachers Trang and Hoa [7].

1.1.2.2. Coherence Difficulties.

An academic essay writing is coherent when it is organized in such a way meeting the organization for an essay. Therefore, students' difficulties deal with essay organization Trang and Hoa [7]; McCrostie [15]. There are eight difficulties- to write a good introduction, formulate a good thesis statement, relate relevant main ideas of each paragraph in the body to the thesis statement, develop main ideas into complete paragraphs, express each main controlling idea in one paragraph only, write a good concluding sentence for each paragraph, and to write a good concluding paragraph to the essay.

1.1.2.3. Cohesion Difficulties.

Students' difficulties in cohesion fall into four problems McCrostie [15]; Ahmed [14]. First, the difficulty is to link sentences and paragraphs using appropriate cohesive devices. Second, it is difficult for students to use reference ties in their writing. Third, it is hard to use substitution to make the written text cohesive. Last, it is not easy to use ellipsis smoothly in writing. In other words, the problems are linking sentences and paragraphs, using reference, using substitution, and using ellipsis.

1.1.2.4. Lexical Difficulties.

Lexical difficulties fall into four problems Gustilo and Magno [9]. The first problem is to use the most appropriate vocabulary in writing. The second one is to use word synonyms. The third is to use word antonyms. The last is to use idioms and word collocations in writing correctly. In short, the lexical difficulties are diction, synonyms, using antonyms, and idioms and word collocations.

1.1.2.5. Mechanic Difficulties.

Mechanics is the use of language structure correctly. There are three problems frequently faced by students in writing Ahmed [14]; Gustilo and Magno [9]. First, making grammatically correct sentences presents difficulties for students. In addition, using correct punctuation creates run-on- sentences. Spelling is the the other problem faced in essay writing. In sum, the use of grammatically correct sentences, punctuations, and spellings needs to be practiced more.

2. METHOD

This study was a descriptive study. The data for students' problems were collected by questionnaires administered to both 38 students who were already enrolled at *keterampilan Menulis* course and 7 teachers to examine what they did, experienced, and observed in the classroom.

All students and teachers were the native speakers of Indonesian. Students wrote academic essay writing in Indonesian language, and teachers were Indonesian teachers at Indonesian Language of Education Department, Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia. There were 5 indicators elaborated in 23 items which can be clearly seen in the following table:

Table 1 Indicators for Students, Difficulties in Academic Essay Writing

No	Indicators	Items
1	**Prewriting Difficulties**	1. Choosing the topic of writing
		2. Generating relevant and consistent ideas to my topic
		3. Planning interesting and relevant topics
		4. Planning unfamiliar topics
2	**Coherence Difficulties**	5. Writing a good introduction to the essay
		6. Writing a good thesis statement to the essay
		7. Writing a good main idea for essay paragraphs
		8. Writing relevant main ideas to the thesis statement
		9. Developing main idea into complete paragraphs
		10. Expressing each main controlling idea in one paragraph only
		11. Writing a good concluding sentence for each paragraph
		12. Writing a good concluding paragraph to the essay
3	**Cohesion Difficulties**	13. Linking sentences and paragraphs using appropriate cohesive devices
		14. Using reference ties in your writing
		15. Using substitution
		16. Using ellipsis
4	**Lexical Difficulties**	17. Using the most appropriate vocabulary in writing
		18. Using word synonyms
		19. Using word antonyms
		20. Using idioms and word collocations in writing correctly
5	**Mechanic Difficulties**	21. Writing grammatically correct sentences
		22. Applying the correct punctuation in writing
		23. Writing correctly spelled words

The responses gained form the student and teacher questionnaires were analyzed by the following steps Riduwan [16]:
1. The highest score of the questionnaire was multiplied by the total number of respondents.
2. Get all items scored (Σ)
3. Divide the score of the all items by the highest score and multiplied by 100 to get the percentage.
4. Have the criterion interpretation as in the following:
     0% - 25% : very easy
     26% - 50 % :easy
     51% - 75% : difficult
     76% - 100% : very difficult

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the questionnaires was to discover students' difficulties in simple Indonesian academic essay writing from student writers and teachers. Such difficulties would be the focus of the contents and the exercises of teaching and learning. The questionnaires were constructed based on the indicators of good academic essay writings. Both student and teacher questionnaires had five indicators with 23 items, four items for prewriting difficulties, 8 items for coherence difficulties, 4 items for cohesion difficulties, 4 items for lexical difficulties, and 3 items for mechanic difficulties. The analysis of student difficulties result was described as in the following:

Students' Responses

Table 2. Students' Responses on Prewriting Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	f	f	f	%	
1	Prewriting Difficulties	1. Choosing the topic of writing	13	19	5	1	46.05	Easy
		2. Generating relevant and consistent ideas to my topic	6	13	17	2	59.96	Difficult
		3. Planning interesting and relevant topics	6	17	11	4	58.55	Difficult
		4. Planning unfamiliar topics	3	9	19	7	66.73	Difficult
mean							57. 82	Difficult

From the table 2 above, students experienced choosing the topic of writing was easy (46.05 % of difficulty), while the others are difficult. The major difficulty was planning unfamiliar topics (66.73 % of difficulty). The mean score of the four items shows that prewriting was difficult for the students.

Table 3. Students' Responses on Coherence Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	F	f	f	%	
2	Coherence Difficulties	1. Writing a good introduction to the essay	3	20	13	2	59.21	Difficult
		2. Writing a good thesis statement to the essay	3	17	16	2	65.18	Difficult
		3. Writing a good main idea for essay paragraphs	3	15	18	2	62.50	Difficult
		4. Writing relevant main ideas to the thesis statement	2	14	17	5	66.44	Difficult
		5. Developing main idea into complete paragraphs	2	15	15	6	67.33	Difficult
		6. Expressing controlling idea in one	3	11	21	3	65.78	Difficult

			VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)		
		paragraph only						
		7. Writing a good concluding sentence for each paragraph	4	17	15	2	59.86	Difficult
		8. Writing a good concluding paragraph to the essay	4	17	15	2	59.86	Difficult
	Mean						63.27	Difficult

From the table 3 above students, students experienced that all items of coherence were difficult (63.27% of the mean of difficulty. Developing main idea into complete paragraphs was the major difficulty (67.33 % of difficulty)

Writing a good introduction to the essay was the least difficult (59.86 %. of difficulty The interpretation was that the students faced difficulties in making a coherent essay.

Table 4. Students' Responses on Cohesion Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	F	f	f	%	
3	Cohesion Difficulties	1. Linking sentences and paragraphs using appropriate cohesive devices	2	10	22	4	68.42	Difficult
		2. Using reference ties in your writing	1	12	21	4	68.42	Difficult
		3. Using substitution	3	13	17	5	65.78	Difficult
		4. Using ellipsis	0	8	24	6	69.07	Difficult
Mean							67.93	Difficult

From the table 4 above students, students experienced that all items of cohesion were difficult (67.93% of the mean of difficulty). The major difficult cohesion device was using

ellipsis (69.07% of difficulty). Substitution was the least difficult. The interpretation was that the students faced difficulties in producing a cohesive essay.

Table 5. Students' Responses on Lexical Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	F	f	f	%	
4	Lexical Difficulties	1. Using appropriate vocabulary in writing	0	22	14	2	61.84	Difficult
		2. Using word synonyms	2	15	18	3	61.18	Difficult
		3. Using word antonyms	1	15	19	3	65.78	Difficult

		4. Using idioms and word collocations in writing correctly	1	6	22	9	75.65	Very Difficult
	Mean						66.12	Difficult

From the table 5 above, it is interpreted that applying lexical devices was difficult seen form 66.12% means of difficulty. The students can use Indonesian synonyms (61.18% of difficulty). The major difficulty was using idioms and word collocations in writing correctly (75.65% of difficulty). All four lexical devices were experience difficult for students.

Table 6. Students' Responses on Mechanic Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	F	f	f	%	
	Mechanic Difficulties	1. Writing grammatically correct sentences	1	12	17	8	71.05	Difficult
		2. Applying the correct punctuation in writing	3	17	16	2	61.18	Difficult
		3. Writing correctly spelled words	7	20	9	2	53.94	Difficult
	Mean						62.06	Difficult

From the table 6 above, it is interpreted that applying mechanic devices was difficult (66.06 % of means of difficulty). Writing correctly spelled words is least difficult (53.94 % of difficulty). The major difficulty was writing grammatically correct sentences (71.05% of difficulty). All four lexical devices were experience difficult for students.

Teacher Responses
Like student questionnaires, teacher questionnaires had five indicators with 23 items, four items for prewriting difficulties, 8 items for coherence difficulties, 4 items for cohesion difficulties, 4 items for lexical difficulties, and 3 items for mechanic difficulties. The analysis of student difficulties was described in the following tables:

Table 7. Teachers' Responses on Prewriting Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	f	f	f	%	
1	Prewriting Difficulties	1. Choosing the topic of writing	0	3	4	0	75	Difficult
		2. Generating relevant and consistent ideas	0	0	6	1	78.57	Very Difficult
		3. Planning interesting and relevant topics	0	5	2	0	57.14	Difficult
		4. Planning unfamiliar topics	0	0	3	4	75	Difficult
mean							71.43	Difficult

From the table 7 above, it is interpreted that writing teachers found that prewriting was difficult for the students (71.43 % means of difficulty). Generating relevant and consistent ideas was very difficult one for the students (78.57% of difficulty. Interestingly, choosing the topic was as difficult as planning unfamiliar topics (75% of difficulty). All four prewriting devices, according to teachers, were difficult for students.

Table 8. Teachers' Responses on Coherence Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	f	f	f	%	
2	Coherence Difficulties	1. Writing a good introduction to the essay	0	1	5	1	75	Difficult
		2. Writing a good thesis statement to the essay	0	2	5	0	67.85	Difficult
		3. Writing a good main idea for essay paragraphs	0	4	3	0	60.71	Difficult
		4. Writing relevant main ideas to the thesis statement	0	1	6	0	71.42	Difficult
		5. Developing main idea into complete paragraphs	0	1	5	1	75	Difficult
		6. Expressing one idea paragraph only	0	2	4	1	71.42	Difficult
		7. Writing a good concluding sentence for each paragraph	0	5	2	0	57.14	Difficult
		8. Writing a good concluding paragraph to the essay	0	4	3	0	60.71	Difficult
Mean							67.41	Difficult

From the table 8 above, it is interpreted that writing teachers found that coherence was difficult for the students (67.41 % of means of difficulty). Writing a good introduction to the essay was as difficult as developing main idea into complete paragraphs (75% of difficulty).

Writing a good concluding paragraph to the essay was least difficult (60.71 % of difficulty). All eight cohesion devices, according to the teachers, were difficult for students.

Table 9. Teachers' Responses on Cohesion Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	f	f	f	%	
3	Cohesion Difficulties	1. Linking sentences and paragraphs using appropriate cohesive devices	0	2	5	0	67.85	Difficult
		2. Using reference ties	0	2	5	0	67.85	Difficult
		3. Using substitution	0	3	4	0	64.28	Difficult
		4. Using ellipsis	0	3	4	0	64.28	Difficult
Mean							66.07	Difficult

From the table 9 above, it is interpreted the four cohesion devices are difficult for the students as noted by the teachers (66.07 % of means of difficulty). Interestingly, teachers found that linking sentences and paragraphs using appropriate cohesive devices was as difficult as using

reference ties for the students (67.85% of difficulty). In addition, using substitution was as difficult as using ellipsis (64.28 of difficulty). In short, all four cohesion devices, according to teachers, were difficult for students.

Table 10. Teachers' Responses on Lexical Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	f	f	f	%	
4	Lexical difficulties	1. Using the most appropriate vocabulary in writing	0	2	5	0	67.85	Difficult
		2. Using word synonyms	0	2	5	0	67.85	Difficult
		3. Using word antonyms	0	2	5	0	67.85	Difficult
		4. Using idioms and word collocations in writing correctly	0	1	2	4	85.71	Very Difficult
Mean							72.32	Difficult

From the table 10 above, it is interpreted that teachers discovered that the four lexical devices are difficult for the students (72.32% of means of difficulty). The teachers found that using idioms and word collocations correctly was the very difficult (85.71% of difficulty). Using the most appropriate vocabulary, using synonyms, and using antonyms were equally difficult (67.85% of difficulty). In short, all four lexical devices, according to teachers, were difficult for students.

Table 11. Teachers' Responses on Mechanic Difficulties

No	Indicators	Items	VE (1)	E (2)	D (3)	VD (4)	Interpretation	
			f	f	f	f	%	
5	Mechanic Difficulties	1. Writing grammatically correct sentences	0	1	5	1	75	Difficult
		2. Applying the correct punctuation in writing	0	2	2	3	78.57	Very Difficult
		3. Writing correctly spelled words	0	4	3	0	60.71	Difficult
	Mean						71.43	Difficult

From the table 11 above, it is interpreted that the three mechanic devices are difficult for the students (71.43% of means of difficulty). The writing teachers found that applying the correct punctuation was very difficult for the students (78.57% of difficulty). Writing correctly spelled words was the least difficult (60.71% of difficulty. In short, all three mechanic devices, according to teachers, were difficult for students.

Table 12. Summary of the Students' Problems: Students' and Teachers' Responses

No	Indicators	Students' Responses		Teachers' Responses	
		Difficulty (% mean)	Major most difficult devices	Difficulty (% mean)	The most difficult devices
1	Prewriting Difficulties	Difficult	Planning unfamiliar topics	Difficult	Generating relevant and consistent ideas
2	Coherence Difficulties	Difficult	Developing main idea into complete paragraphs	Difficult	Developing main idea into complete paragraphs.
3	Cohesion Difficulties	Difficult	using ellipsis	Difficult	Writing a good introduction to the essay and Developing main idea

4	Lexical Difficulties	Difficult	using idioms and word collocations	Difficult	into complete paragraphs
					using idioms and word collocations
5	Mechanic Difficulties	Difficult	grammatically correct sentences	Difficult	punctuation

From the table above, it can be summarized that responses from students and teachers reveal that academic essay writings is still a problem for the student writers. In case of all indicators were difficult more students, there were some devices which are the most difficult ones indicated by the percentage of devices in each indicator. In other words, both students and teachers agreed that writing academic essays was difficult.

As all five indicators were difficult for the student writers, some devices were problems for them. In prewriting, the student writers experienced that when they were asked to write on the topics on unfamiliar topics, it was difficult for them to generate relevant and consistent ideas, and the teachers viewed the same. In coherence, both the teachers and the student writers agreed that expressing controlling idea or main idea in one paragraph was difficult for the student writers. In cohesion, the teachers and the student writers viewed differently. The student writers experienced that using ellipsis was the most difficult one for them, while the teachers viewed that writing a good introduction to the essay and developing main idea into complete paragraphs were the most difficult ones for the students. In lexical, both the teachers and the student writers agreed that using idioms and word collocations was very difficult. In mechanics, the student writers experienced the difficulty in making grammatically correct sentences. Unlike the student writers, the teacher viewed punctuation as major obstacle for the student writers.

It is also interesting to note that student writers experienced that all 35 devices are difficult, except choosing the topic of writing which was easy for them. However, the teachers discovered that it was difficult for the student writers. Unlike student writers, the teachers indicated that two devices which were very difficult student writers generating relevant and consistent ideas Using idioms and word collocations and applying the correct punctuation in writing. These areas of weaknesses need to be solved and become the focus on teaching and learning academic essay writings.

4. CONCLUSION

From the findings above, there are three conclusions that can be drawn. First, in spite of a few different responses from student writers and teachers, writing simple Indonesian academic essays is a problem for the student writers. Second, even though all indicators seen from the mean of percentage, there are some devices which are not really problems for the student writers. Third, there are some areas of weaknesses that will be emphasis on teaching and learning Indonesian academic essay writings.

There are writing on the topics on unfamiliar topics, expressing controlling idea or main idea in one paragraph, using ellipsis, writing a good introduction to the essay and developing main idea into complete paragraphs, using idioms and word collocations, make grammatically correct sentences, using appropriate punctuation. Those three conclusions can be considered as the improvement of hateaching and learning academic essay writings.

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