



# Problems in Learning Essay Writing for English for Specific Purpose Students: A Case Study in Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta

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**Abstract.** English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is one of the courses taught at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) for several study programs, such as Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Informatics Engineering, Accounting, Management, and other study programs. One of the goals of the inclusion of ESP in the curriculum is to improve students' English skills, not only in general English but also related to specific terms in each field. In this ESP course, students learn about skills in English which include reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar which is then linked to topics according to their respective fields. One of the most important materials in this ESP is writing essays. The lecturers found several problems in the lecture process, both from brainstorming, and the writing process, to the writing itself. This study uses a qualitative method, namely by looking at 30 essays written by students from various study programs, then researchers will look at the problems experienced by students. The research finds some results, they are critical thinking, the punctuation, word choice, grammatical problems, and the structure of the essay as the students' problems in learning ESP.

**Keywords:** Learning Essay Writing · English for Specific Purposes · students · writing problems

## 1 Introduction

Learning English can be very challenging, especially for those learning English for Specific Purpose (ESP). Just like General English (GE), in the ESP course, students learn all four skills in English namely speaking, reading, listening, and writing. The problems that they face are varied, starting from their own intention in learning the language until the difficulties in understanding the materials.

The two problems mentioned earlier are related to each other. Milaningrum, Damayanti, and Gafur [1] stated that most students are not really enthusiastic in learning ESP, especially for Writing Subjects. In another research, According to Su [2], research on the EFL environment in Asian nations has shown that linguistic understanding, particularly with regard to grammatical norms and word usage, is the most challenging area for students' writing. Those results prove that the problems related to writing, especially

in ESP are not only from the nature of the language but also from the willingness of the learners.

Writing is considered one of the most important skills in ESP. It is because in writing, students learn to communicate effectively by not only the vocabularies in a specific field, but also the mechanics and the language style used in a piece of paper. Applebee via Graham [3] stated that in writing, the information and idea will be transmitted widely. It will also be possible to review and evaluate the idea faster. Graham also said that in writing, the persuasive potential is very big and it is able to influence people. Therefore, students will also train to think critically since the information expressed in it should be clear and logical. In terms of ESP, the students will be able to understand their field better and share it to wider society because English is the international language.

Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) is one of the universities teaching its students ESP, especially for writing. Essay Writing is a mandatory subject that should be taken by students as a requirement to graduate from this university. In the teaching and learning process, the lecturers often find problems faced by the students such as the brainstorming, the writing process, and the final draft.

There has been some research about ESP and its problems. Musikhin [4] conducted research on developing a technology for ESP learners that will enable them to communicate effectively. Another research was done by Septiana [5], who was concerned about the teachers' challenges in teaching ESP subjects. However, none of this research focused on students' problems, especially on writing an essay in ESP subject.

Therefore, the goal of this research is to find out problems in learning essay writing for ESP students in UMY. To achieve the goal, the writers come up with research question: What are UMY students' problems in learning the Essay Writing subject?

## 2 Literature Review

Recent studies have shown a clear preference for an ESP model that emphasizes the development of professional competence, fusing academic learning and professional experience in the complex and dynamic manipulation of numerous social contexts where most forms of specialized communication take place [4].

It is no longer necessary to debate whether students from particular backgrounds should work on their English language proficiency; rather, educators should debate how to do so [6], enabling students to engage in full-fledged conversation in scenarios that are representative of their line of work. As a result, the language abilities needed by students from different backgrounds should be related to their line of work, and language instruction should concentrate on tasks that are pertinent to and characteristic of their profession in a global context. Therefore, in order for students to properly communicate with coworkers from various countries, a language learning program must also increase learners' general knowledge [4].

Research about ESP has been conducted by the previous researchers who discussed many aspects and challenges in teaching ESP, such as teaching ESP in the specific background of study [4, 7, 8]; the challenges in teaching ESP [8]; the tradition in teaching ESP [5].

Musikhin [4] discussed the ESP guidebook for professional language training in his studies. In this regard, the handbook shouldn't define its own objectives in the learner's

field of expertise; rather, it should offer the best lexicon, set of language drills, and learning tools to empower professionals to carry out complete communication in the context of international cooperation. As a result, improving learners' general communication skills in their line of work and laying the foundation for later language learning and improvement should be the two main objectives of an ESP course.

Fitria [8] mentions the benefits of ESP, such as the first is the rate at which you learn. As a result of ESP, needed linguistic components are acquired more quickly. The second point to consider is learning efficiency. On an ESP, course participants make the most of their learning resources, putting them all to work studying specific, pre-identified linguistic objects and skills. The third factor is the effectiveness of learning. Teachers are prepared to utilize language effectively and correctly in job-related tasks after completing an ESP course, tasks that were identified prior to the course through need analysis.

Additionally, she talks about ESP's qualities. ESP has three qualities, according to Dudley-Evans and John [9]: (1) it satisfies the unique needs of learners; (2) it makes use of the discipline's fundamental methodologies and activities; and (3) it is centered and focused on the language that is appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genre. Additionally, ESP has some variable characteristics, including the following: (1) ESP is related to or designed for specific disciplines; (2) ESP may be used in specific teaching situations, or even in a different methodology than general English; and (3) ESP is probably designed or used for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation.

In her study, Septiana [5] discusses the difficulties in teaching ESP. The first step is to trick the instructor. Numerous traits are shared by ESP instructors at universities, including inexperience and youth (junior lecturers) [10]. The second barrier is the subject matter. The truth is that several commercial textbooks available on the market fail to satisfy students' needs because they vary from college to college, academic year to academic year, and class to class [11]. The third challenge is curriculum development, which is entirely under the control of campus autonomy. The curriculum is a set of instructional guidelines created in accordance with the department's, faculty's, and institutions' vision and missions, depending on where the students are in the learning process.

### 3 Method

This investigation is a qualitative descriptive study. The study's focus was on UMY students enrolled in an essay-writing course during the 2021–2022 academic year. Essays written by students served as the study's subject. 30 essays made up the sample, which was chosen at random. The documentation method was used as the data collection strategy. Finding information about things that have been determined was done using the documentation approach. By employing this technique, the author may explain the discovery using free language.

Performing a documentation technique to gather information from the essays was the first step of the data collecting technique. The second step was data analysis to identify the issue the students had when writing their essays. Identification and classification

came last. The data were located during this phase and categorized according to their category. The laptop and categorization table were the tools employed in this study.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

From the 30 essays we collected, there were seven problems related to essay writing in ESP courses, namely plagiarism, sentence structure, punctuation, essay organization, terminology, word choice and critical thinking. The following is an analysis of each of the problems found:

### 4.1 Plagiarism

Plagiarism is defined as the copying and pasting of others' abused intellectual output without crediting the original writers, inventors, or creators. Plagiarism can be done on purpose or unintentionally. If there are parallels in two scientific works without citing and changing the source text using their own language, these two motivational factors are still considered plagiarism [12]. From the data we found, there were two acts of plagiarism carried out by students, namely (1) copy-pasting from sources on the internet without mentioning the author's name, and (2) the results of writing that were exactly the same as other fellow students.

The following is an example of plagiarism detected data:

- (1) ... is used to process an image or design of a component that is to be created. The image is then converted into a customized program that can be read by a CNC machine afterwards. After that, the machine will automatically process the finished goods needed.
- (2) The metal fabrication laboratory is a place where students do practical work. Inside the laboratory has several machines such as milling machines, lathe machine, welding machines, and CNC machines. that place is the place of manufacture, casting, welding, until turning is completed. I can discover new experiences from the laboratory by making things from melting metal, forming castings to finished products. the laboratory produces goods in the form of pipes, chairs, electric car frames, and much more.

In the example data (1), the author copies and pastes the text from a website on the internet, namely <https://soloabadi.com/en/the-definition-of-cnc-machines-and-use-of-cnc-machines-in-the-industrial-world/>. Although not copied and pasted all the writings, the author is still considered to have committed an act of plagiarism because he has written several sentences that are exactly the same as those on the website.

In example (2), the researchers find two data with the exact same writing, and written by two different people.

In his article, Shadiqi [12] mentions three types of plagiarism based on the motivation to do so, namely (1) intentional plagiarism, (2) unintentional plagiarism, and inadvertent plagiarism. From the sample data above, it can be concluded that the essay writer committed intentional plagiarism. This may be because students have difficulty in

developing ideas or in writing in English. Therefore, they choose to copy other people's work to do their writing assignments.

Cooper [13] identifies three steps that can be taken to avoid plagiarism: (1) Confiscate the original source, the most representative source, or the most recent source to prevent "intellectual theft" ideas from being stolen. (2) Paraphrasing and quoting (3) Making use of a plagiarism detection service.

## 4.2 Grammatical Problems

Prescriptive grammar uses the phrase "grammatical error" to refer to incorrect, atypical, or disputed usage, such as an improper verb tense or an improper placement of a modifier, likewise called a use error. Although they can sometimes be misconstrued, factual errors, logical fallacies, misspellings, typographical errors, and improper punctuation are typically distinct from grammatical problems [14]. Major grammatical problems include the usage of tenses, active and passive voice, and subject-verb agreement. In addition to these problems, prepositions, articles, and pronouns were also problematic for students [15]. The following is a list of some of the mistakes found in the written examples.

- (3) Laboratory of metal fabrication in G6 building, ground floor.
- (4) Inside the laboratory has several machines such as milling machines, lathe machine, welding machines, and CNC machines.

In example (3), we can see that it is not a complete sentence because it is only in the form of a phrase. If we want to make a complete sentence, it should be "Laboratory of metal fabrication is in G6 Building, ground floor". The subject is "laboratory of metal fabrication", "is" is the verb, and "in G6 building, ground floor" is the adverb.

In example (4), the sentence is also not complete. "Inside the laboratory" is the adverb, and "has" is the verb. Rather than make "Inside the laboratory" to be an adverb, we can delete "Inside" and make "the laboratory" to be the subject of the sentence. Therefore, the complete sentence becomes "The laboratory has several machines such as milling machines, lathe machines, welding machines, and CNC machines."

## 4.3 Punctuation

Consider a text written without periods, commas, or colons. It would undoubtedly be tough to read. When unclear statements are employed in academic writing, an author can easily be misread. Punctuation marks are primarily used to clarify sentences. For example, the absence of a comma in a sentence can convey an interpretation that differs from the author's intended message. This is why, when editing or proofreading academic articles, an editor or proofreader pays close attention to punctuation mistakes. While the importance of punctuation marks in writing, particularly academic essays, cannot be overstated, the proper use of these punctuation marks is even more crucial. Because punctuation marks in English text are so similar, many people use several punctuation signs interchangeably.

Based on the data, we found that the general punctuation problem is the error of using period (.) and coma (.). Here are the examples:

- (5) Inside the laboratory has several machines such as milling machines, lathe machine, welding machines, and CNC machines. that place is the place of manufacture, casting, welding, until turning is completed.
- (6) The room is quite big, clean and comfortable.

In the first example, the data shows the period between two clauses, while the writer did not put a capital letter at the beginning of the sentence after the period. The sentences should be “Inside the laboratory has several machines such as milling machines, lathe machine, welding machines, and CNC machines. That place is the place of manufacture, casting, welding, until turning is completed”. The second example is coordinate sentence with “and” as the connector. When we use parallelism in a sentence, we have to make sure that we use the same part of speech and the correct punctuation. Therefore, the sentence should be “The room is quite big, clean, and comfortable”. There should be a comma before the connector “and”.

#### 4.4 Word Choice

In the vocabulary level, there are also some problems. Some of the problems are incorrect word choices, redundancy, inconsistency of terminology, inability to find the English word and mistyping the words. For example:

- (7) the inconsistency of terminology, the student used 4 different English phrases to refer Indonesian phrase Jalur Jalan Lintas Selatan (Gunungkidul), which are Gunungkidul Southern Road, Gunungkidul Southern Cross Road, JLS and southern causeway;
- (8) inability to find the English word, in which the student still used the Indonesian abbreviation APBN instead of State Budget.

The most unfortunate event of all vocabulary problems is that some students are unable to find the specific terminology in English, even though those are related to their major, since they chose the topic by themselves, they should be familiar with the English terminology for the specific word in the topic that they chose. As in example (7), the student is not familiar with English word for Jalur Jalan Lintas. He chose 4 different English phrases to refer it. Since the topic is related to civil engineering, in which department he is majoring, he should be familiar with the specific terminology. Even more, he should perform a search to find the required terminology. In English, Jalur Jalan Lintas can be referred as coastal highway, since the JLS meant by the student indeed has the characteristics of coastal highway. Another example is:

- (9) there is a student that used highway over the sea instead of causeway.

## 4.5 Critical Thinking

Essay writing helps to develop critical thinking skills in addition to writing abilities. The capacity to evaluate a situation or problem by analyzing data, making assumptions, constructing something, summarizing arguments, and drawing conclusions from what is methodically evaluated is known as critical thinking [16]. Based on the data gathered, it was determined that the essay submitted by the students had the most critical thinking issues because both the writing and the concept organizations were underdeveloped.

Besides that, most students did not address the given feedback well. It could be because they were unable to interpret the feedback, or they simply ignored the feedback, as found in some students' work. Even though the writing that they composed was relative good but never address the feedback.

Moreover, the data also shows that many students are unable to perform self-proofreading, even though there is a way to perform it through spelling and grammar check in their Microsoft Word app, and this situation affects their writing style.

## 4.6 Essay Organization

The organization of an essay makes the readers easy to understand the essay and the messages conveyed in the essay. Savage and Mayer [17] in their book also said that there are three basic structures in an essay namely introduction, body, and conclusion. However, writers often ignore the importance of the organization in an essay. The success of an essay depends a lot on how a writer organizes the information.

Based on the data collected by the researchers, students made some errors in organizing their essays such as:

### 4.6.1 Unclear Thesis Statement

Thesis statement is the main idea of an essay and it is located at the end of the introduction. Thesis statements can also indicate types of the essay. It also mentions the controlling idea [17]. The example below shows an unclear thesis statement that makes it hard to understand what the writer wants.

Everyone has had to go to school. They must have a strong sense of the school's excellence. They may continue to work or study after graduating from high school. A school is an educational institution where students of pupils are taught under the direction of educations or teachers. Most countries have a formal education system. Which is normally required in order to produce advanced learners who have completed the process. College is a more advanced learning experience in which a student selects a major. There are several factors to consider when choosing a major, one of which is one's hobbies and talents. (Data 13).

The data is taken from an essay entitled 'School and Lecture'. The thesis statement in the paragraph is the last sentence which is bold. The essay is actually a compare contrast essay about school and college but as what is stated, the thesis does not show that the writer is going to explain the similarities and differences between those two objects.

#### 4.6.2 Unclear Topic Sentences

Written in the beginning of everybody paragraph, the topic sentence should reflect the thesis statement and give a clear idea of what the paragraph is about. Savage and Mayer [17] stated “an effective paragraph contains a good topic sentence.” However, these data show that the topic sentences are unclear and confusing.

People smoke in many reason that no one can interrupt their decision.

This data is taken from data 16, an essay entitled “Cigarette, Vapor, and Their Controversial Existence” focusing on the similarities and differences between cigarettes and vape. The thesis statement of this essay is “I only talks about its similarities and differences between its match Vapor.” However, one of the topic sentences above does not concern the similarities nor the differences. Instead, the topic sentence talks about the reason why people smoke or vape.

Topic Sentence body paragraph 2: Second, Mental health is important, very important.  
Topic sentence body paragraph 3: Finally, after reading this article and observing the problems that often occur, I realized that metal health is very important and not a trivial problem.

It is seen that there are two similar ideas in two different paragraphs. It makes the idea confusing since there is no further explanation in the body paragraph 3. It only consists of one sentence, which is the topic sentence.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, there are six (6) problems that ESP students face in writing an essay namely plagiarism, grammatical problems, punctuation, word choices, critical thinking, and the organization of the essay.

The problems confirm that learning an ESP has its own challenges, especially in writing skills. Due to these challenges, some students find a shortcut by copying and taking an essay from the internet without giving any credits. Some of them also have an issue with critical thinking so they find it hard to develop their idea. This makes the information not delivered well to the readers. Besides critical thinking, the punctuation, word choice, grammatical problems, and the structure of the essay are the other things that lead to confusion in understanding the material conveyed in the essay.

In the near future, other research concerning this topic should also consider the opinion of the students about their difficulty in the classroom activities when learning essay writing, especially in ESP class.

Finally, the authors expect that this research can be used by teachers and lecturers to understand the ESP students’ problems in writing an essay. Furthermore, educators can find the solution and method in teaching the materials because English is very important for our students regardless of their study programs, especially the writing skill.

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