ISLAMIC STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON ESSAY WRITING CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study aims to find out the Islamic students' perception on writing essays challenges. The sample of this research is 47 students majoring in English Education in one of the Pesantren-s in East Java. The research method used is descriptive quantitative with survey techniques. In this study, a questionnaire was used to determine the frequency of answers and the percentage. The data is calculated with Microsoft Excel. The main findings of this study are: there are 4 types of problems that students face in their essay writing course. They are confused in developing topics, grammatical errors, word choice problems and poor organization. The overall mean of students' writing problems in fourth semester is 3.35 and being categorized as "high". Specifically, students' problems in developing topics are 3.46, grammatical errors (3.20), word choice problems (3.51), and poor organization (3.21). Furthermore, from the interpretation of the mean score, most of the students agreed that they had dominant problems in vocabulary and topic development.

Keywords: Essay, Writing skill, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Writing an English essay is one of the mandatory tasks that must be mastered by students majoring in English. An essay is a work consisting of several paragraphs written to express the author's opinion, define a term, and convey the author's argument regarding a problem topic (Eripuddin, 2016). Of course, in its process, students must have a good understanding and adequate knowledge regarding the topic of the material to be written. Determining the topic of the essay can be supported by reading many scientific books, research articles, and academic journals so that students have broad knowledge. From the results of this reading, it is usually easy to develop ideas for their writing. Therefore, it can be understood that writing an essay is different from writing an ordinary essay.

Writing is one of the important skills in language activities. It is not only in the form of transferring ideas into written form, but more on how ideas can be conveyed in a structured and easy-to-understand way by readers (Hadiani, 2013). (Brown & Lee, 2015) mentions 6 aspects of writing. First, *content,* it is the essence of writing. This element determines how broad the author's knowledge regarding the material written and how he formulates the thesis *statement,* connects various ideas, and develops these ideas to be a coherent writing. The second is *organization,* the structure or organization in writing is according to the writing procedure and shows a coherent and sequential idea. Furthermore, *discourse,* this element includes the regularity of the structure of the discourse delivered in an article which includes the *topic sentence*, paragraph coherence, the use of conjunctions, cohesive devices, and rhetorical ways of writing. The fourth aspect is *syntax.* This component is usually assessed from the accuracy of the sentence structure including subject-verb agreement, tenses, and word order. Fifth is *vocabulary*, written language demands more vocabulary than spoken

communication. Good writers will learn to take advantage of the added richness in the choice of words. Finally, *mechanics*, which are important basic elements in writing such as punctuation, spelling, and (if any) citation.

Writing skill can be honed with habit (Warburton, 2006). In this skill, language learners are required to think critically and express ideas, thoughts, and opinions in written form. Writing activities are often considered difficult by some people, especially language learners. To make good writing, students must be able to put their ideas and views into written form, and this is not easy. In writing, students usually experience several difficulties, such as in developing ideas, using good and appropriate grammar, determining appropriate diction, and compiling coherent and easy-to-read essays (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017).

In line with that, in its application, students often complain that writing assignments, including writing essays, are difficult to overcome. In discussing the task of writing scientific essays, Bailey stated that this task is often considered as the most difficult task faced by students (Bailey, 2015). He also added that generally English learners are proficient in English speaking, such as during interpersonal dialogue in public places. However, most of them felt surprised and complicated when faced with the task of writing an essay or making a report in English. In fact (Okpe & Onjewu, 2017) explains that essay writing skills can be one of the big things that are useful to do because they can improve daily communication, good achievement in writing, and become a great professional writer. Therefore, essay writing is an important subject for students.

Essays are part of writing activities that have a special structure. The essay has 3 components, namely the introduction, body paragraph, and conclusion (Warburton, 2006). In the introduction, the author conveys the topic. It should start with *a hook* in order to grab the reader's attention. That section should provide some information related to the topic. The topic should be general discussion so that it is easy to get to the main points and will be more direct and specific and lead to *the thesis statement*. Here, the *thesis statement* is the main point like a roadmap that directs the author to write the body paragraph. The *body paragraph* consists of several paragraphs that describe and support *the thesis statement.* These paragraphs contain detailed information regarding the thesis statemen*t.* Last *conclusion.* This section contains all the main points in the body section.

Many studies have discussed difficulties in writing skills from different perspectives and contexts. (Habibi, 2017) found that undergraduate students in Jambi had challenge using diction and illogical writing structures when writing essays. This case also occurs in students who are the object of research by (Palupi & Septiana, 2018). They found that the problems that students often encounter in writing are grammar and sentence structure. From these findings, it can be concluded that knowledge of grammar (*grammar*) is an important foundation in writing skills. In addition, (Aunurrahman, 2019) found that undergraduate students in Pontianak experienced anxiety in writing. (Fareed et al., 2016) know that the main problem in Pakistani ESL students' writing is inadequate linguistic skills.

The contribution of research to writing skills has been proven in studies in various countries. However, it is rare to find empirical evidence of difficulties in writing English essays faced by Islamic boarding school students in Indonesia where English is still a foreign language. Therefore, it is important to investigate the problems or difficulties faced by English Language Education (PBI) students in one of the East Java Islamic boarding schools in writing essays. The ability to write English essays is very important for PBI students

because this skill is needed for daily assignments and as a basis for writing final assignments. Thus, this study aims to explore the students' perspective on writing essay challenges.

METHOD

This research is quantitative research with a survey approach designed to investigate the students' perspective in writing English essays challenges. Thus, a questionnaire related to students' writing difficulties was developed to collect data from the respondents. The data will then be used to see the percentage of students who have challenge in each field. After data analysis, findings and discussions will be formulated to answer the problem formulation. The respondents of this study were PBI students at one of the pesantren campuses in Probolinggo, East Java, in the fourth semester consisting of classes A and B who programmed the Advance Writing course. The number of participants is around 47 students.

This study uses a questionnaire as a research instrument. The questionnaire distributed to respondents is divided into two pages. The first page lists demographic questions such as name, gender, and age. The second page consists of questions about areas of student challenge in writing. In this study, the researcher used a questionnaire that adapted from previous research, namely (Alfaki, 2015; Habibi, 2017; Huy, 2015). This technique is used to obtain information related to thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, and behavior of research respondents. The questionnaire used in this study used a Likert scale. Each statement in the questionnaire is accompanied by five *ranges,* namely Strongly Agree: 5 points, Agree: 4 points, Neutral: 3 points, Disagree*:* 2 points, and Strongly Disagree: 1 point.

In the data collection, there are several steps taken. First, the researcher asked for research permission from the head of the English Education Study Program, then distributed requesting respondents' willingness, distributed questionnaires, and collected the results of the questionnaires.

After the data was collected, the researcher then analyzed the results of the questionnaire with the help of Microsoft Excel. At this stage, the researcher must find the mean score of the student responses and interpret the results. The mean score is found by using the formula $M = \frac{\sum f.w}{\sum f}$

M = *mean* (mean)
fw = total frequency
f = total respondents (Arikunto, 2011)

To find out the criteria for the mean score, the researcher uses the interpretation of the mean score scale as follows:

Table 1. Interpretation of the mean score

Mean Score	Interpretation
1.00-1.80	Very Low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.40	Medium
3.41-4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Very high

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study there were 20 questions for a questionnaire related to students' perceptions of the difficulties they faced in writing essays. The questions are divided into 4 sections representing each type of problem faced by students. These include the development of ideas, grammar, the use of diction, and the writing organization. The results of the mean score for each type of challenge based on the student responses can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. The Mean score of students' perceptions on writing challenges

No.	Type of challenge	Mean	Interpretation
1.	Confused in developing topic	3.468085	High
2.	Grammatical Error	3.208511	Medium
3.	Problem of word choices	3.510638	High
4.	Poor organization	3.212766	Medium
	Total mean score	**3.35**	**High**

Based on the results in Table 2, it was found that among the types of challenge in writing essays, problems in the use of diction get a mean score of 3.51. This score represents the student's opinion that the use of diction in making good essays is the most dominant problem compared to other types of problems. Students are often confused in determining the right diction to convey the ideas in their minds. In addition, these results also show that the foreign vocabulary owned by students is still low. Furthermore, problems in developing topics have mean score of 3.46. That is, students often find it difficult to develop their ideas into a *thesis statement* which is then supported by *supporting ideas* in the form of facts, *anecdotes*, and examples. In practice, students often write discussions that are not related to the topic. Next, Poor organization gets a mean score of 3.21. They consider that ordering ideas according to the rules of writing is the third problem that affects the quality of essay writing. Grammar errors, the fourth problem faced by students in writing essays, earned a mean score of 3.20. That is, grammatical errors do not often occur in their writing. They can identify the use of tenses, pronouns, and subject-verb agreement well. In essence, all the main problem experienced by students during the essay writing process is determining the correct diction in the writing.

Finding

Based on the results of the questionnaire, it can be described the obstacles faced by students in writing scientific essays, including: idea development, use of structure and grammar, use of appropriate diction, and a coherent and sustainable organization/structure of ideas. In the following table, the results of the descriptive analysis related to the frequency, percentage, average value, and interpretation of students' level of difficulty are presented.

Table 3. Problems in developing ideas on topic

No.	Topic Development	Frequency					M	Level
		SD	D	N	A	SA		
1.	Getting difficulties in developing thoughts and ideas	1	3	10	29	4	3.680851	High
		2%	6%	21%	62%	9%		

2.	Having troubles in constructing the words to make the supporting ideas	1	3	13	27	3	3.595745	High
		2%	6%	28%	57%	6%		
3.	Having difficulties defining items that relate to the topic.	1	5	18	19	4	3.425532	High
		2%	11%	38%	40%	9%		
4.	I often take thoughts and ideas from articles, books, and websites without mentioning the author.	3	5	18	19	2	3.255319	Medium
		6%	11%	38%	40%	4%		
5.	Having difficulties in paraphrasing thoughts and ideas I take from articles, books, and websites..	1	7	16	19	4	3.382979	Medium
		2%	15%	34%	40%	9%		
	Overall Mean						**3.468085**	**High**

Table 3 shows that the problem faced by students in developing ideas on topics is that they find it difficult to develop thoughts and ideas dealing with topics (mean score 3.6) as the highest-level problem, this score indicates that developing their ideas in writing is the most dominant problem in writing essays. Then continued with the writer having difficulty in constructing words to make supporting ideas. This is indicated by the number of respondents who agreed as many as 27 people compared to those who disagreed with only 3 people. In addition, the difficulty of students in taking thoughts and ideas from articles, books, and websites without mentioning the author is the last problem in developing ideas on the topic, because the average score obtained is 3.2 and is at a moderate level.

Table 4. Grammatical Errors

No.	Grammar Problems	Frequency					Mean	Level
		SD	D	N	A	SA		
6.	Having a frequent problem in using correct tenses.	2	5	14	22	4	3.446809	High
		4%	11%	30%	47%	9%		
7.	Having difficulties in using passive voice	4	9	19	12	3	3.021277	Medium
		9%	19%	40%	26%	6%		
8.	Having poor grammar makes my writing not so good.	2	5	9	22	9	3.659574	High
		4%	11%	19%	47%	19%		
9.	Grammar makes me take a long time to put the correct tenses which are appropriate to the event.	1	6	16	20	4	3.425532	High
		2%	13%	34%	43%	9%		
10.	I am not familiar with punctuation rules.	6	19	15	7	0	2.489362	Low
		13%	40%	32%	15%	0%		
	Overall Average						**3.208511**	**Mediu**

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Table 4 shows some problems experienced by students in using grammar in writing essays. The highest problem experienced by students is the aspect of having bad grammar which influences their writing product, this is shown by 47% who agree with this problem. In addition, there is the problem of difficulty in using *passive voice* which is at a moderate level with 12 respondents' agreement. The last problem is that the writer is not familiar with the punctuation rules (mean score 2.4). This problem is the least experienced by students. This is evidenced by the frequency of respondents who disagreed with as many as 19 people.

Table 5. Vocabularies Problem

No.	Diction Problem	Frequency					Mean	Level
		SD	D	N	A	SA		
11.	Lack of vocabulary makes me confused in writing.	1	3	13	22	8	3.702128	High
		2%	6%	28%	47%	17%		
12.	I have difficulty in choosing the correct words with the right meaning.	1	5	13	23	5	3.553191	High
		2%	11%	28%	49%	11%		
13.	I find it difficult to make my paragraphs relate and cohere.	1	1	15	24	6	3.702128	High
		2%	2%	32%	51%	13%		
14.	Using new vocabulary takes a long time.	0	7	22	14	4	3.319149	Medium
		0%	15%	47%	30%	9%		
15.	I have difficulty combining sentences in my writing.	0	8	20	17	2	3.276596	Medium
		0%	17%	43%	36%	4%		
	Overall Average						**3,510638**	**High**

Table 5 shows the problems faced by students regarding vocabulary when writing essays in English. In the table above, there are two statements with the same average score (3.7), namely lack of vocabulary in writing and difficulty in making coherent and cohesive essays. Then proceed with the problem of using new vocabulary which takes a long time, this problem ranks 4th in vocabulary problems and occupies a medium level. The last problem is about the difficulty in combining sentences for writing (3.2). This means that students still have difficulty in combining sentences in writing. They often compose sentences that do not fit the topic being discussed.

Table 6. Problems in Essay Organization

No.	Organizational Problems Essay	Frequency					Mean	Level
		SD	D	N	A	SA		
16.	I often have difficulty in brainstorming techniques.	0	2	18	24	3	3.595745	High
		0%	4%	38%	51%	6%		
17.	I have poorly	0	2	17	25	3	3.617021	High

	writing to organize, sometimes fail to choose a topic.	0%	4%	36%	53%	6%		
18.	I do not outline or outline before writing.	4	11	16	13	3	3.00	Medium
		9%	23%	34%	28%	6%		
19.	In writing, I do not make mind mapping.	1	14	16	13	3	3.06383	Medium
		2%	30%	34%	28%	6%		
20.	I don't make a draft before I start writing.	5	15	14	11	2	2.787234	Low
		11%	32%	30%	23%	4%		
	Overall Average						**3.212766**	**Medium**

Table 6 shows students' problems in essay organization. In this table, the problem of being poor in writing organization, sometimes failing to choose a topic is the most dominant problem with an average score of 3.6. Furthermore, the second largest respondents agreed that they have difficulty in brainstorming techniques. This can be seen from the percentage of respondents who agree as much as 51% compared to those who disagree only 4%. In addition, the problem of the writer not making a draft before starting to write is the lowest level problem, this is evidenced by the number of respondents who disagreed more (32%) than those who agreed (23%). This means that some students are still making plans or drafts before starting to write.

Discussion

There were 20 questionnaire items distributed to students to find out the Islamic students' perception on writing essays challenges. Based on the information presented in the research results, all types of writing challenges such as confusion in developing ideas, grammatical errors, vocabulary problems, and essay organization problems have been experienced by students in the essay writing process. By knowing the results of students' perceptions for each type of difficulty, it can be seen from the results of the study that students of English Education at a boarding school campus in Probolinggo, East Java, experienced several obstacles when writing English essays. It is known from the average score of each type of constraint. There are 2 types of obstacles that are most often experienced by the fourth semester students in the essay writing process. Among them are the vocabulary and topic development problems.

First, the vocabulary problem. Some students are unable to use the correct vocabulary in writing essays so they have difficulty in combining sentences with other sentences. It can be shown from their response to the statement "I have difficulty in making my paragraphs interconnected and coherent". There are 51% of students who agree on the statement so it can be categorized as having a high average score. Furthermore, the problem of word choice also occurs due to the lack of students' English vocabulary as evidenced by 47% of respondents answering agree with the statement "The lack of vocabulary makes me confused in writing". Furthermore, students think that determining the right vocabulary in writing is also an obstacle that is often faced (49% of respondents). They take a long time to use new vocabulary in writing (30% of respondents) and find it difficult to combine logical sentences

(36%). This finding is in line with previous research from (Ghulamuddin et al., 2021; Habibi, 2017; Keong & Mussa, 2015) which found that in writing, lack of vocabulary is one of the obstacles that students meet, making it difficult for them to write what's on their mind.

Based on the findings, the vocabulary problem got the highest mean score of 3.51 compared to other types of challenges. The problem of word choice is a crucial problem in the Writing course. If students' vocabulary is low, they cannot express their ideas and opinions well. This is in accordance with (Gunawan, 2019) that in developing writing skills, students must have a complete vocabulary. By having a complete vocabulary, a writer can put his ideas into writing easily. However, many of the respondents' answers also have problems in all the types. All problems have a relationship to each other in learning Writing.

Furthermore, besides vocabulary, students also often experience problems in developing ideas. In an essay, there is a certain structure that can make the essay easy to understand, including the introductory paragraph, body paragraph, and concluding paragraph (Oshima & Hogue, 2017). An essay only discusses one topic which is then developed with supporting information in the body section. Of course, the writer must have extensive knowledge and lots of supporting material so that the essay is meaningful and easy to understand. With an overall mean score of 3.4, it shows that the type of difficulty in developing ideas is the second most dominant problem after vocabulary that is often experienced by Islamic students. There are four statements on this type of problem and those are agreed by the respondents. Based on the respondents' answers to each question, most of the Islamic students agreed with the statement "I have difficulty finding thoughts and ideas to develop" with an average score of 3.6 or 62% of the total respondents. This means that more than half of the total respondents stated that in making an essay, they often have difficulty in finding ideas. This finding is in line with previous research by (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Setyowati et al., 2020) that the difficulties commonly experienced by students in writing argumentative texts are the organization of writing, thesis statements, scientific references, supporting evidence, opinions. disclaimer, *academic tone,* content, and writing development.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of Islamic students on the challenges in writing essays. The respondents of this study were the fourth semester PBI students at one of the pesantren campuses in Probolinggo, East Java, consisting of classes A and B who take the Advanced Writing course with a total of 47 students as respondents. Based on the findings and discussion, we conclude that students often face problems in determining the correct vocabulary and developing ideas from topics in an essay. Based on the conclusions above, there are several suggestions put forward. First, students need help to overcome the problems they experience in the process of writing essays. Second, the lecturers should recognize the strategies that can help overcome the problems that have been identified in the process of essay writing. Furthermore, from the results of this study, further researchers can conduct deeper research on student problems in terms of writing essays by analyzing students' writing.

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