Writing difficulties faced by novice writers

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Academic writing, Writing difficulties,	Although there have been abundant literatures that discuss about students' difficulties in academic writing, very few of them investigate the problems faced by novice writers. The present study aimed at investigating the difficulties experienced by the writers who did not have any prior academic trainings to write an English academic text. To this end, a total of 70 third-semester students from English department were assigned an open-ended questionnaire asking them to write any difficulties or problems they encountered while being asked to write an argumentative essay. Drawing on qualitative approach using thematic analysis, the findings show that the novice writers experienced 9 types of difficulties that were related to vocabulary, tenses, idea, sentence, topic, feeling of insecurity, grammar, time, and concept. Among those difficulties, vocabulary related one was found as the major problem that the novice writer experienced. The results suggested that academic writing is challenging for the inexperienced writers and having sufficient vocabulary size can be the prerequisite before taking academic writing course.

INTRODUCTION

Among the four language skills, there is no doubt that writing is very challenging. This is because when someone writes, he does not only transfer his thought into a piece of paper or on to a digital medium but there is also a cognitive process that is highly demanding happening (Derakhshan & Shirejini, 2020). Some complicated steps such as "organizing ideas or information, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing" need to be done (Floranti & Andiantika, 2019). Therefore, in order to make a sophisticated written product someone has to go and endure that demanding process especially for the second language learners (Kuyyogsuy, 2019). In fact, the prejudiced assumption that students must know how to write just make the situation even worse (Cloutier, 2016).

Great number of concerns have been allocated to the investigation of the difficulties encountered by students in writing. They range from investigating the most common problem in writing (Derakhshan & Shirejini, 2020), academic writing (Bian & Wang, 2016; Parisotto et al., 2019), argumentative writing (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Peloghitis, 2016; Rahmatunisa, 2014), essay (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Ceylan, 2019; Nugraheni & Basya, 2018; Uba & Souidi, 2020) and research paper (Khemanuwong et al., 2020; Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020) . Some researchers even focus their investigation on different education level such as elementary (de Smedt et al., 2018), junior high (Alameddine & Mirza, 2016; Jasim Al-Shujairi & Tan, 2017), undergraduate

(Altikriti, 2022; Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2022; Pineteh, 2013), postgraduate (Alharbi, 2017; Ankawi, 2020; El-Freihat, 2021; Khemanuwong et al., 2020; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Singh, 2019).

Among the research mentioned above, the findings related to writing difficulties can be categorized into several types. Some students experienced difficulties in terms of language (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Derakhshan & Shirejini, 2020; Floranti & Andiantika, 2019; Ginting, 2019; Husna & Multazim, 2019; Ismayanti & Kholiq, 2020; Jasim Al-Shujairi & Tan, 2017; Jiang et al., 2022; Nugraheni & Basya, 2018; Thomas, 2017; Uba & Souidi, 2020), knowledge of writing in particular genre (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Ceylan, 2019; Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Peloghitis, 2016), content knowledge (Alharbi, 2017; MacIntyre, 2019; Parisotto et al., 2019; Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020; Tabasum Niroo & Williams, 2022), and personal aspects (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; de Smedt et al., 2018; Parisotto et al., 2019; Rahmatunisa, 2014; Tabasum Niroo & Williams, 2022; Thomas, 2017).

Overall, the previous studies have investigated writing difficulties in various types of writing genres and participants. Many of the them have been focused on the difficulties that were based on the participants that have had particular writing knowledge before being investigated. In other words, the nature of the previous studies is mostly very evaluative investigating whether or not after learning and gaining some knowledge in a particular writing genre, the participants still experienced difficulties. In contrast, far too little attention has been paid to investigate the writing difficulties of the students who did not have any particular genre writing knowledge previously. As the consequence, this paper examines the writing difficulties experienced by the students who did not have any previous writing knowledge before particularly in essay. Since writing knowledge and writing quality is positively correlated (Rofiqoh et al., 2022), the difficulties that the students encountered in the previous studies might be the result of their inability in understanding the teaching materials and not because of the natural difficulties found within themselves. This study fills the gap by investigating the natural difficulties that the students experienced in a particular writing genre before they had the related knowledge. The research questions of this study are:

1. What difficulties did the undergraduate students' experience when they wrote an essay without any prior writing knowledge?

2. How were the percentages of difficulties experienced by the students when they were writing an essay?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach. According to (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) qualitative approach is utilized for discovering and comprehending the meaning that individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue. The data used in this research was the interview results of the third semester students of English Department University of Bengkulu in 2022. The interview was taken rather in an unconventional way. First, we asked the students to write an argumentative essay. Before writing, we give them 25 themes to help them find the topics. If they had their own interesting topic, they could also write it. This was done in order to give the students freedom to write an essay that they liked. Second, we gave them a piece of paper with one interview question

asking about the challenges that they experienced while writing the essays. Each student was given 60 minutes to write their answer. To give them the flexibility in expressing their ideas, they were allowed to write their answers either in Indonesian language or English. Last, after the students had completed their answers, the researcher collected the papers to be analyzed as the data. We analyzed the data qualitatively using thematic analysis to yield the problem that the students encountered while writing their first academic essay in English.

Participants

70 students participated in this study. They consisted of 38 students from A class and 32 students from the B class. All of them were the students of English Education Study Program University of Bengkulu who were enrolling in their third semester when the study was being conducted. We did not put any gender indication on them as we did not really intend to investigate that. Therefore, in this research we took both male and female students as one united group.

Data Analysis Procedures

Since the data of this research was the students' interview answers written on a piece of paper in a form of paragraphs, the most suitable way in analyzing the data was by using thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). By using this, the researchers could identify themes in verbatim related to the interview question. In order to make the work easier, we used QDA Miner Lite versionv.2.0.9 software. We did it in two subsequent ways. First, we read each sentence of the data to find the themes. Once we had found one theme, we put the word into the search machine so that it could search the word through all of the documents with in the data set. By doing so, we could obtain two benefits. The first one, it made the investigating process faster, second, we did not need to read all paper again since the sentences containing any theme that were already identified would have been highlighted so we did not read that part again and just skip it to the part of the sentence that might contain different themes.

FINDINGS
Students Challenges

The current research investigated the writing challenges encountered by students who did not have any writing experience before. The result can be seen from the following
Table: 1 Students Writing Difficulties

No	CLUSTER OF DIFFICULTIES	DIFFICULTIES	QUANTITY
1	**Vocabulary**	• Lack of words • Forgot the word's meaning • Not knowing the correct words • Difficult in arranging the words • Not knowing the correct spelling	5
2	**Tenses**	• Not knowing the correct tense	1
3	**Idea**	• Difficult in finding ideas • Difficult in developing ideas	4

4	**Sentence**	• Difficult in choosing ideas • Losing ideas • Difficult in determining the proper sentences • Difficult in arranging the sentences • Difficult in continuing the sentences • Difficult in connecting the sentences	4
5	**Topic**	• Difficult in focusing the topic • Difficult in choosing the topic • Difficult in understanding the topic	3
6	**Feeling of insecurity**	• Feeling anxious • Feeling afraid • Feeling nervous • Feeling panicked • Feeling confused • Feeling palpitated • Feeling unconfident • Feeling worried	8
7	**Grammar**	• Lacking of grammar knowledge • Forgetting the correct grammar • Using grammar hesitantly	3
8	**Time**	• Lack of time given • Poor time management	2
9	**Writing concept**	• Lack of writing concept understanding • Inability to use outline technique properly	2
Total	**9**		**32**

From the table above, we can see that there were 32 points of difficulties that can be clustered into 9 categories encountered by inexperienced students when they wrote an academic English essay. They range from difficulties related to *Vocabulary to Writing Concept.* The *Vocabulary* difficulty consists of 8 subcategories which were *lack of words, forgot the word's meaning, not knowing the correct words, difficulty in arranging the words,* and *not knowing the correct spelling.* For the *Tenses* difficulty, it only had 1 category which was *not knowing the correct tenses. Idea,* on the other hand, had 4 sub difficulties which were difficulties in *finding ideas, developing ideas, choosing ideas,* and losing ideas. Another 4 subcategories stood under *Sentence* category and they were *difficulty in determining the proper sentences, arranging the sentences, continuing the sentences and connecting the sentences.* Moreover, *Topic* had 3 sub categories presented as difficulties in *focusing the topic, choosing the topic* and *understanding the*

topic. Then, difficulties related to *Feeling of Insecurity* contributed the most subcategories which was 8 consisting of the feeling of *anxious, afraid, nervous, panicked, confused, palpitated, confident,* and *worried.* For the *Grammar, lacking of grammar knowledge, forgetting the correct grammar,* and *using grammar hesitantly* were the three subcategories that it was under. *Time* had two subcategories; *lack of time given* and *poor time management.* Lastly, difficulties related to *Writing concept* was also found with *lack of writing concept understanding* and *inability to use outline technique properly.* For more detail information regarding the finding of each category, it is provided in the appendix 1.

Percentage of the difficulties
Table 2. Percentages of difficulties

No	Category	Cases	% of Cases
1	Vocabulary	40	57.10%
2	Topic	25	35.70%
3	Sentence	24	34.30%
4	Insecurity	21	30.00%
5	Idea	20	28.60%
6	Grammar	16	22.90%
7	Time	13	18.60%
8	Writing concept	5	7.10%
9	Tenses	2	2.90%

The table above shows the distribution of the code which represent the difficulties experienced by the students while writing academic essay. In general, it can be concluded that difficulties related to *vocabulary* was the most significant challenges that the students encountered while *tenses* was deemed as the least challenging one. If we look further, almost 60% of the students experienced problem related to vocabulary making this the most encountered problem among the participants. Then, the problems related to *topic, sentence,* and *insecurity* were in the second position with the percentage of 35,70%, 34,30%, and 30% respectively. Although the difficulty related to *idea* was not far different from the previous one which was 28%, it was followed by *time* difficulty with only around two percent lower. The last one, tense had the smallest percentage with only 2.90 % of the total participants which was reported by only two students.

DISCUSSION

The first question of this research was what difficulties the undergraduate students encountered when they wrote an academic essay without any previous writing knowledge. The results suggest that there are 32 difficulties that they faced while writing. These difficulties can be categorized into 9 big points which were difficulties related to *Vocabulary, Tenses, Idea, Sentence, Topic, Feeling of Insecurity, Grammar, Time,* and *Writing Concept.* If those categories are broken down further, we can split them into three big categories; linguistics (*vocabulary, tenses, sentence,* and *grammar*), knowledge (*writing concept, idea,* and *topic*), and Individual (*time,* and *anxiety*). This may imply

that academic writing is linguistically, cognitively, and individually difficult for those who have not had any experience before.

In terms of linguistic difficulties, this finding confirms Floranti & Andiantika's (2019) study on Senior Highschool students investigating the difficulties encountered by the students when composing their writing. It was found that, the students committed 14 linguistic errors. Then, the present study finding is also similar to Al Badi's (2015) who investigated 20 postgraduate international students (Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Omani) who were studying at TEFL Graduate certificate course in Australia. The study was done through questionnaire investigating their perception of difficulties they had experienced during the writing assignment. The result showed that difficulties in language use, coherence and cohesion was mostly faced by the students. In similar vein, Singh (2019) conducted a study on 16 volunteer lecturers in a Malaysia higher education institution by conducting one-on-one interview asking their perspective on their students' academic writing difficulties. The results show that most of their students had difficulties in English language proficiency.

In terms of knowledge difficulties, the present study findings are similar with the one conducted by Altikriti (2022). In his study, he investigated the difficulties faced by Jordanian undergraduate students of English language and literature by distributing 25 items of questionnaire to them. The study revealed that the students had severely limited knowledge on how to write a research paper. Another study, which was conducted by Uba & Souidi (2020) also discovered similar result. The contextual data of their study discovered that 90%
Of English for Business students did not understand thesis statement. It was also found that most of the students also did not possess the knowledge to generate and organize ideas. Furthermore, Parisotto et al. (2019) in their study also found that the first-year students of pedagogy course were having difficulties in academic writing. Those difficulties were the lack of knowledge about the topic or subject of the writing and standard knowledge. Lastly, the present study also confirms what was found by (Ismayanti & Kholiq, 2020) when they investigated the writing difficulties of senior high school students in writing descriptive text. The findings indicate that the lack of knowledge related to subject content was experienced by the students.

For the difficulties related to personal, some other studies also have similar findings to the present study. One of them is Parisotto et al.'s (2019) which discovered the feeling of insecurities felt by the students when writing academic writing. Furthermore, they explained that there were a strong indication of a low self-confidence and increased anxiety. After that, Bulqiyah et al.'s (2021) study also resonances the personal difficulties. In this study, it was found that the students struggled with affective difficulty such as lack of self-confidence. Finally, in the study of (Thomas, 2017), the students were also burdened by lack of confidence while doing writing. Hence, personally writing an academic paper is difficult for unknowledgeable writers.

On the other hand, some other studies had different results from the present study. First one, Shahsavar & Kourepaz (2020) conducted a study on postgraduate students' writing difficulties in writing literature review. Their findings show that the students encountered challenges in terms of synthesizing, criticizing, and or explaining the literature review. They argue that the reason is due to the students' limited critical

thinking skills. In addition, Ozfidan and Mitchell (2020) also conducted a study on Saudi Background students on writing difficulties in argumentative writing. They concluded that instead of having problems in linguistic, knowledge of writing, and personal condition, the students had problem that is related to genre knowledge. They add that the students did not recognize the different features or characteristics of a particular writing that they had which was argumentative one. Last, in Jiang et al.'s (2022) study, it was found that Chinese ESL students perceived integrating sources and evidence into the part of their writing was the most challenging thing that they faced.

The second research question was about the percentages of difficulties experienced by the students when they were writing an essay. The results show that the most difficult challenge faced by the students was vocabulary. It gives a strong indication that most of the students had difficulty in their vocabulary. They did not have the words needed when they want to express their ideas in English. As a consequence, vocabulary was the students' major problem when it comes to writing an academic paper. The present findings seem to be consistent with other research which found that in writing an academic paper difficulties related to vocabulary tends to always be the major problems. Floranti & Andiantika (2019) in their research found that among the problems encountered by the students in academic writing, less mastery of the vocabulary was the major problem. In similar vein, Xiao & Xin (2015) also discovered similar results. Their study shows that lack of language knowledge is found to be the severest problem for an engineering student to write an academic text. They found that the students did not have sufficient lexical resources to compose an academic text. Both of the research above were conducted on senior high school students and both of them show that vocabulary was the greatest challenge for the students. However, the finding of the current study does not support Parisotto et al.'s (2019) study. In their study, the most problem found was personal insecurity and anxiety before lack of writing topics, deficient knowledge of standard language and other 15 difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS

The study results show that in writing academic paper, novice writers face many difficulties. Those difficulties are related to *vocabulary, writing topic, constructing sentences, feeling of insecurity, generating ideas, grammar, time management, knowing writing concept,* and *tenses.* In a more general category, those difficulties can be grouped into three bigger category which are difficulties related to language, knowledge, and individual. Moreover, those difficulties are not evenly faced by the students. Among all difficulties found, vocabulary is the most the major difficulties found by the students. It gives a strong indication that it is very essential for students to have sufficient vocabulary size before they can proceed to writing class. In other words, it will be very difficult for teachers to teach writing for students who have not yet had enough vocabulary needed to write a topic of academic writing.

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Appendix
Result of the investigation

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Vocabulary				
Lack of words	33	14.3%	28	40.0%
Forgot the word's meaning	6	2.6%	5	7.1%
Not knowing the correct word	15	6.5%	12	17.1%
Difficult in arranging the words	10	4.3%	8	11.4%
Not knowing the correct spelling	2	0.9%	1	1.4%
Tenses				
Not knowing the Correct tense	4	1.7%	2	2.9%
Idea				
Difficult in finding ideas	13	5.7%	12	17.1%
Difficult in develloping ideas	13	5.7%	11	15.7%
Difficult in choosing ideas	2	0.9%	2	2.9%
Losing ideas	2	0.9%	1	1.4%
Sentence				
Difficult in determining the proper sentence	2	0.9%	2	2.9%
Difficult in arranging the sentences	22	9.6%	19	27.1%
Difficult in continuing the sentences	3	1.3%	3	4.3%
Difficult in connecting the sentences	2	0.9%	2	2.9%
Topic				
Difficult in focusing the topic	4	1.7%	4	5.7%
Difficult in choosing the topic	15	6.5%	13	18.6%
Difficult in understanding the topic	10	4.3%	8	11.4%
Feeling of insecurity				
Feeling anxious	4	1.7%	4	5.7%
Feeling afraid	10	4.3%	8	11.4%
Feeling nervous	8	3.5%	7	10.0%
Feeling panicked	3	1.3%	2	2.9%
Feeling confused	1	0.4%	1	1.4%
Feeling palpitated	1	0.4%	1	1.4%
Feeling unconfident	3	1.3%	3	4.3%
Feeling worried	3	1.3%	3	4.3%
Grammar				
Lacking of grammar knowledge	13	5.7%	12	17.1%
Forgetting the correct grammar	1	0.4%	1	1.4%
Using grammar hesitantly	3	1.3%	3	4.3%
Time				
Lacking of the time given	15	6.5%	12	17.1%
Poor time management	1	0.4%	1	1.4%
Writing concept				
Lack of Writing concept understanding	5	2.2%	4	5.7%
Unable to use outline technique properly	1	0.4%	1	1.4%