Exploring First-Year EFL Students' Problems in Essay Writing

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Abstract: Writing has been considered the most difficult skill to master by EFL university students. It needs more effort and time for mastery. Some challenges in writing can make students confused. This condition has inspired the researchers to conduct the study. The study aims to identify the common errors in first-year students' essay writing and provide suggestive solutions for the problems encountered by the students. This study was implemented using quantitative and qualitative approaches (mixed method). The researchers analyzed 205 students' essays to identify the writing errors. After that, they randomly interviewed selected students to find the specific problems and suggestions. The data gathered were then classified and analyzed thematically. Based on the analyzed data, the most frequent error was faulty sentences which was 60.41%, grammar as the second error was 16.88%, the third error was mechanics with 13.1%, and vocabulary and other errors were 5.38% and 4.22%. The result shows that most students got difficulty writing sentences correctly. Therefore, providing appropriate learning materials for students and giving feedback on their writing are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Writing means expressing your ideas in written text. Writing is an important skill to be learned by English as Foreign Language (EFL) students. In line with that, Jordan (2003) states that writing is an instrument of thinking that allows students to express their thought. Writing needs more effort in order to arrange the ideas systematically. As stated by Pinter (2006), writing is a complex skill progressing from the level of copying familiar words and phrases to developing an awareness of text structures, genres, and the processes of drafting and editing, and writing for an audience. It means that writing skills should be taught in line with their interests so that the target of teaching writing will be achieved.

Students commonly face some problems and make errors in writing academic texts, for example, essays, reports, and research papers in an EFL context. As a result, students find

difficulties accomplishing writing tasks (Fared et al., 2016; Shang, 2013). Writing an English essay will be more challenging for many university students. They get difficulties not only in expressing and arranging the ideas but also in writing these ideas into readable text (Richards and Renandya, 2002). Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify the common errors in students' essay writing and provide suggestive solutions for the problems encountered by the students.

Teaching writing has been more difficult because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teaching-learning process must be done in distance learning. It means that online learning will be implemented until an uncertain time. This condition contributes to teachers' feedback to students and vice versa. As stated by Byrne (1997), writing has three problems. The first is a psychological problem. The teacher cannot get direct feedback from the students as in speaking. It needs a process to get feedback from the students. The second is linguistic problems. Students have to ensure grammar, choice words, punctuation, cohesive device, and organization for transferring their ideas into written text. The last is a cognitive problem. Learning writing is not the same as learning speaking. Writing skill is not acquired by natural process. It takes guidance and instructions from the teachers. In an online learning situation, teaching and learning writing will be more challenging to be done.

There is a plethora of research about students' error analysis in writing. One of them is about students' grammatical errors in paragraph writing. Rizaldy and Cahyani (2020) found that students made dominant errors in using indefinite articles. Hendrawati (2018) stated that misformation became the most frequent error found in her study. Both subjects of the research were the second and third-semester students in universities. Meanwhile, Ayana (2020) conducted a study investigating students' writing errors among first-year university students in Ethiopia. It showed that some recommendations and improvements should be made to improve students' essay writing.

Many studies have conducted error analysis, but no study explores students' errors and problems in essay writing written by non-English students, especially in engineering or science. Hence, the current study aims to examine the errors and problems of first-year undergraduate students at Sumatera Institute of Technology (ITERA) while composing their essays in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Error and mistake are two terms that are familiar in error analysis research. However, an error is different from a mistake. Brown (1980) states that error and mistake are technically two different phenomena. A mistake is defined as a performance error that is a random guess or slip, in which it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. Meanwhile, an error is not a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of native speakers who refer to the learners' interlanguage competence.

It is in line with Setyawan (2012), saying that a mistake is a deviation because of performance factors such as memory limitation (making a sequence of tenses and agreement in long sentences), fatigue, pronunciation, spelling, emotional strain, etc. It is usually random and readily corrected by the learners when their focuses are drawn to them. In contrast, an error is a systematic, consistent deviance of the learners' linguistic system at a given stage of learning.

An error may happen both in speaking and writing, which is common as long as it is a part of language learning. Dulay et al. (1982) believe that error is a flawed side of learner speech or writing. It is a part of conversation or composition that deviates from some selected norms of mature language performance. Therefore, people cannot learn any language without making errors first.

Basically, an error can be classified into three categories. There are pre-systematic error, post-systematic error, and systematic error. Corder (1981) states pre systematic error as an error that is committed by the learners when they are trying to come to grips with a new view, post-systematic error as an error that occurs when the learners forget points that have been understood previously, and then systematic error as an error which occurs when the learners have formed an inaccurate hypothesis about the target language.

If the learners make errors in learning English, it can be normal. From that situation, English teachers or instructors can improve the learners' knowledge to avoid committing errors. In line with Brown (2000), mistakes are no significance to the learning process. Meanwhile, errors result from a lack of knowledge about the rules of the language that the learners learn, which represent the indication of a traditional competence. James (1998) says that errors are "signals" that the learners have not fully understood the target language.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that the difference between error and mistake is that error is an ungrammatical utterance that refers to language competence (refers to the implicit knowledge of the language) that is made when learners are lack knowledge of

the rules of a language that is used. In comparison, a mistake is an imperfectness of utterance, referring to the actual use of a language in a certain situation (refers to the language performance) that the learners readily correct when their attention is drawn to them.

In this research, error and mistake are not differentiated. To follow the definition proposed, any forms of deviation or immature language use of writing problems made by the students in their essays were analyzed through surface strategy taxonomy and communicative effect taxonomy by Dulay et al. (1982). The errors made by the students were also put in percentage.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

To conduct the study, the researchers employed quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the writing errors and suggestions or recommendations to improve the writing skills of first-year EFL undergraduate students at Sumatera Institute of Technology (ITERA). The researchers used the explanatory sequential design to provide complete information on the research issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fallon (2016) states that quantitative research uses a top-down process. As a result, quantitative research has structured questions, and it can be used to gather information from a large number of people. In other words, quantitative research can analyze responses or answers from a large number of participants. In this research, a quantitative approach was used to describe the errors investigated in students' written essays. At the same time, a qualitative design was implemented to analyze the students' suggestions on how to improve their essay writing. Wang (2018, p. 118) argues that "by using qualitative research methods, human activities are examined, and underlying meanings are explored, which is transformational for both the researchers and the participants involved". It implies that qualitative research seeks specific answers related to particular problems or settings with limited respondents. Moreover, the result of the data analysis will be varied depending on the respondents' answers.

Participants

The study population was 205 students who took an English course (MKU) at Sumatera Institute of Technology (ITERA) in 2020/2021. There were three TPB *(Tahap Persiapan Bersama)* classes with 205 students altogether. They produced essay writing for the final

assignment. Besides that, there were ten students from three classes as the participants in the interview.

Procedures

This study started by collecting essays from EFL undergraduate students in Sumatera Institute of Technology (ITERA) who took an English course, a compulsory course for all first-year ITERA students. Two hundred five students from three classes were purposively selected to write an essay individually. The guidelines of writing an essay were explained as follows: (1) students freely chose any topics based on their interests, except narrative and procedure texts; (2) their essays must be three paragraphs long and not more than 7-10 sentences in each paragraph, due to a big number of students; (3) they had to write an invoking authority in their essays (expert's statement or credible information from official institution). The essay was a take-home test that must be done in a week. The researchers collected 205 essays from the students, about 2050 words in total. For the interview, the researchers selected ten students from various classes using a systematic random sampling technique to inquire them to provide their suggestive solutions for improving their essay writing skills.

Data Analysis

The collected essays were marked, and the common errors were identified. After that, these errors were clustered to observe the total of cluster types and cluster tokens in those errors. The data results were then tabulated into frequency and percentage. The interview results were then analyzed and presented descriptively. The conclusion would then be drawn after examining the errors in essay writing and the problems-solutions suggested by students.

FINDINGS

This study explores the errors as problems students face in their essay writing and actions to be taken to improve their writing skills. To collect data, document analysis used a sample of written essays, and students' interviews were employed. For data analysis, the data gathered from written samples of students' essays were analyzed quantitatively using frequency and percentage, whereas students' interviews were analyzed qualitatively.

Table 1. Findings of students' essay

Writing problems	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Faulty sentences		
Subject-verb agreement	90	13,10%
Sentence fragment	85	12,37%
Fused sentences or run-on sentences	81	11,79%
Modifiers (dangling modifiers and misplaced modifiers)	76	11,06%
Faulty Parallel structures	83	12,08%
Subtotal	415	60,41%
2. Mechanics		
Spelling	36	5,24%
Punctuation	54	7,86%
Subtotal	90	13,1%
3. Grammar	116	16,88%
4. Vocabulary		
Wrong forms	22	3,20%
Diction	15	2,18%
Subtotal	37	5,38%
5. Others	29	4,22%
Total	687	100%

The result analysis of students' essay writing samples reveals a total of 687 errors in faulty sentences, mechanics, grammar, vocabulary, and others. From Table 1, the highest number of errors was in the faulty sentences (i.e., 60.41%). The second was a grammatical error (i.e., 16.88%). The third was incorrect use of mechanics (i.e., 13.1%), which was followed by errors in the use of vocabulary (i.e., 5.38%), and other errors (i.e., 4.22%).

Errors in Faulty Sentences

The faulty sentences consist of basic sentence structures like subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, run-on or fused sentences, and faulty parallel structures. The major error is related to errors made in subject-verb agreement, which shows 13.10% of the errors, sentence fragment that covers 12.37%, faulty parallel structures comprising 12.08%, run-on or fused sentences which is about 11.79%, and modifiers that is 11.06% of the total errors made by the students. The common error happened in subject-verb agreement. The problems that can be found, such as "*internet* usually *have* advantage", "the *needs* of long time for sleep there *is* many various", "*teenager have* had", "*there is* many", and "*there is* a lot of"— all of those problems related to subject and verb which should be appropriate each other. If a subject is singular, the verb should be singular and vice versa. The second frequently occurred faulty sentence was the error of sentence fragment, which dealt with a subject-missing sentence, verb-missing sentence, and subordinate clause without independent clauses. For example, "the point is these basketball and soccer games have their respective

places to play but…have the same goal"(subject missing), "what we want…without having to"(verb missing), "online learning is a good solution. Because the easy of the access"(subordinate clause). The third problem found in faulty sentences was parallel sentences. Here are the samples; "the government must also provide better infrastructure services, *to minimize*" (should be followed by verb 1), "by reducing online game, *prolonged depression*, avoiding stress" (should be followed by a gerund), "facing problems are expected to be optimistic, *try to accept*, *try to be strong*" (should be followed by an adjective), "they can adapting" (should be verb 1).

Fused or run-on sentences occur when two independent clauses are joined without punctuation or coordinating conjunction. As found by the researchers, here are the following. "I think the concept of "Indonesian lockdown" is ineffective in several ways and cases, "…it turns out that" (need conjunction because), "It's different from the game of football,…this game must be played in an open field" (need conjunction since). "Binahong leaves are also nutritious for beauty therefore many people look for them" (need coma). Lastly, the problem found was about modifiers and misplaced modifiers. "Having taken many benefits, electricity ran quickly" (is not clear enough for the doer). "There are 790 confirmed corona viruses, *of which* 31 are confirmed" (wrong modifier).

Errors in Grammar and Mechanics

Another problem at ITERA for first-year students in writing an essay was grammatical errors. Grammar plays a pivotal role in making meaningful sentences. However, some grammatical errors in students' writing were found. For instance, "student must…brave" ("be"), "*us*" ("we") as generation z has been using", "Prince Diponegoro is an exemplary figure because of *its* ("his") work", "because…("of") the easy way", "maintaining immunity…("can be")as a preventive solution against disease", "basketball never *die*"("dies"). "ITERA students often hold competitions *between* ("among") study programs", Fredy Mercury relies *in* ("on") his imagination".

Mechanical errors usually occur in writing EFL. Some factors contribute to making errors in spelling and punctuation. One of them is the effect of writing quickly as the consequence of content rather than form. The researchers found some major errors in spelling, such as "it will make us *invected*" ("infected"), "only teach students about "*knowledgment*" ("knowledge"), *wich* ("which"), *concluction* ("conclusion"). Regarding punctuation errors, some errors were made by students, including improper use of

capitalization, commas, and full stops. "Nowadays (need comma) the world more advanced". "*m*any (capitalization) organic materials". "It shows, (omit comma) for e-learning". With self-confidence (need comma) we will be able". "*w*hat (capitalization) is the students' role?". According to Suwono (1978) (need coma) student is.

Errors in Vocabulary and Others

Errors in vocabulary occurred in students' essay writing. To express the writer's idea appropriately, it needs sufficient vocabulary knowledge. According to Hatch & Brown (1995), vocabulary is a list or set of words that individual speakers of a language might use. In the writing context, vocabulary has an important role in conveying the writer's idea into readable text. Nevertheless, students faced some problems in using dictions and wrong forms. Dictions mean using word choice in making sentences appropriately. It means that selecting the right word will be important for expressing the writer's message. For example, "e-cigarettes *entered* (were introduced) in Indonesia in 2012", "because students and teachers do not have a *live* ("direct") interaction", "this is the *application* ("example") of learning", "some of which are to *hone* ("train") skills", "education will become a *provision* ("tool") to be success". "I *brought* ("sang") this song". The other problem is in using incorrect forms. Incorrect forms happened because of incorrect verb tenses. For instance, "H. Dodi Reza ever *tell* ("told") about the song", "there was a second case and *start* ("started") corruption among officials", "we are in the class, we often *lost* ("lose") our signal".

Other errors were made by ITERA first-year students in this essay writing assignment which dealt with writing essay format. Many students made errors in their writing essay format because they did not follow the instructions; for instance, there were no thesis statements in their essay, there was no outline in their essay, there was no consistency between thesis statements as written in the outline and thesis statement as written in the essay, and some of the students' essay writing did not include invoking authority.

Problems and Suggestions in Essay Writing

Students' responses to some interview questions showed a need for cooperation between English instructors and students. They need more guidance during online learning because there are misunderstandings about essay writing instructions. Some mistakes in writing format are as follows: maximum sentences for each paragraph, thesis statement

position, paragraphs total, and outline format. These mistakes confuse or reduce their scores. Moreover, students are interested in receiving appropriate feedback. As a result, instructors' feedback should be clear and easy to understand for revision.

DISCUSSION

Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative Results

The purpose of this research was to analyze ITERA first-year students' essay writing because there is no specific research that has been done previously. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, this research was done using online applications, such as Google Classroom (GCR), Google Meet, or Zoom Meeting. After that, the interview was employed to obtain students' suggestions to improve their writing skills. Then, students' works in the essay were submitted in GCR, so the researchers analyzed the students' work using some criterion problems. After exploring students' errors, the researchers found that the most frequent problem in students' essay writing was faulty sentences that included a subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, faulty parallel structures, fused sentences or run-on sentences, and incorrect use of modifiers.

The second frequent problem was grammar. Students lacked grammar competence. Consequently, their essay writing could be confusing because the ideas were not clearly stated or wrong interpretation. The next problem was in mechanics. Students need to be careful in writing an essay. The errors in spelling and punctuation can distract the readers' attention from understanding the essay. Kisnanto (2016) believes that students' accuracy in using correct grammar can help the learners arrange their ideas into intelligible sentences to successfully communicate in a written form. In other words, in the context of writing, learning grammar in 'context' will be very useful to help students in producing better writing in terms of phrases, sentences, and clauses (Musa, 2021). The finding also reveals that vocabulary in terms of diction and incorrect form became errors in essay writing, affecting students' ideas for becoming vague. Another error is in writing essay format. It looks simple, but many students did not pay attention to the instructions; therefore, their essays need some improvements.

The students' interviews show that the problems in writing essays can be solved together. It needs participation among students, institutions, and instructors. For institutions, because of various learners' ability to understand the materials, there is a consideration to create materials both in foreign language and first language to help the learners comprehend

the materials. In line with that, Sabarun (2020) says that the first language plays an important role in expressing meaning and content; therefore, in the context of essay writing, providing feedback for correction in the first language instead of the target language will be beneficial for the learners. Another result is that the instructors should spend more time assisting the students' essay writing. Based on students' interviews, it will be helpful to solve their problems in writing essays by accepting feedback and comments from the instructors. This statement has been supported by Rejab et al. (2015), who state that teachers' feedback can serve as a useful pedagogical device to improve students' writing. Teachers or instructors have been sources of reliable information for providing the most effective feedback. They have been appropriate enough to support students' essay writing for learning materials. Therefore, the combination of good learning materials and instructors' feedback or guidance will be effective in improving students' essay writing.

The present study has revealed that there were some misunderstandings and misconceptions related to writing instructors' feedback or instructions. Teachers' writing attitudes and students' perceptions of teachers' feedback must be incorporated into classroom discussion to avoid misunderstanding (Muliyah et al., 2020). In terms of correcting errors, some possible factors cause students' errors in their writing. According to Ramadhani (2021), students make mistakes in their writing because of their limited vocabulary and lack of teachers' feedback. Further, those previous studies have supported this present study by combining quantitative and qualitative data to explain the most frequent errors in writing and then to get the reasons for their errors.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of this research is to analyze first-year ITERA students' essay writing and get solutions to the problems. Students' errors in writing and students' interview results reveal that students need more essay writing practice with instructors' guidance to improve their writing skills. In other words, good cooperation among students, instructors, and course designers will be significant in helping students in composing an essay writing.

Based on the data analysis and discussion from this research, the researchers provide several suggestions: EFL instructors should allocate more time to provide writing guidance for students' essay writing and provide insightful feedback and comments to improve students writing. For students, they have to practice writing freely outside the class and read

critically other reading resources to get ideas or topics for improving their writing skills and getting ideas. Furthermore, the idea of learning materials should be written in the first language instead of a foreign language which needs to be implemented by designer course.

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