

## Constraints in writing an essay: agriculture students' voices

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### ABSTRACT

Responding to the pivotal role of English nowadays, higher education institutions require every student to take an English course. In higher education, teaching English focuses more on the specific discipline of the students. It helps students to have good English capabilities within their field of study. Writing skill is demanded because the students are required to publish an article as a graduation requirement. In order to find suitable teaching strategies for writing, it is necessary to know the writing difficulty the students encounter. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the agriculture students' difficulty in writing essays. A descriptive qualitative method was employed in this study. The data was obtained from the interviews and students' essays. The result of the study showed that generating ideas, vocabulary, and grammar are the constraints the students faced. This study concludes that the students need a guidance on those constraints.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is taught from elementary school to higher education in Indonesia, although English is considered a foreign language. Moreover, it is a foreign language taught since Indonesia's independence [1]. It implies that students must have English competence nowadays as English has become a global language; many people use it for communication. As digital technology emerges, making communication across geographical borders is possible. Many people communicate using English to deliver their message, either orally or written. Oral communication is done through video applications, while written communication is done through chat. English competence in the digital era is crucial because students can obtain knowledge through the internet [2], in which English is used. Furthermore, English competence is also a requirement to get a job and do business correspondence with overseas partner [3]. The demand for people with good English competence is increasing in the academic field or career. Higher education institutions require every student to take English courses to respond to the pivotal role of English nowadays. The credit for English courses varies among universities depending on their regulation. In addition, some university encourages their students to publish an article in an international journal as a graduate requirement [4]. Preparing students with sufficient English competence is essential.

In higher education, teaching English focuses more on the specific discipline of the students. It helps students to have good English capabilities within their field of study. In addition, teaching English covers the four skills, i.e., listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Of the four skills, higher education demands writing competence highly [5]. As some universities require their students to publish in International English Language Testing System [4], thus writing competence is needed. Furthermore, standardized test like the international English language testing system (IELTS) also requires writing test [3]. The teaching of writing is undeniably

needed. The teaching of writing can be divided into process-based or product based. Product-based writing focuses on the final result that the students produce and should meet a list of measurement criteria to be a good product. In contrast, process-based writing was defined as involving a thinking process in which students underwent a writing process such as developing an idea into a word, sharpening an idea, organizing coherence, revising the draft, and developing the draft until it became a final product [6]. Product-based is to imitate a model text, while process-based focuses on language use development [7]. Product-based writing is to re-construct a model text and the assessment of the product by referring to a set of criteria. In contrast, process-based writing involves students with a series of processes and developing language until the draft finishes as a final product.

Process-based writing has been gaining interest for language researchers. They found that process-based writing gave many benefits to students writing. Process writing combined with scaffolding makes better students' writing [8]. Collaborative and process writing also improves mathematics department students' writing ability [9]. Process writing combined with video-based mobile enhances students' writing ability [10]. Process-based writing is believed to be a better writing teaching strategy than conventional one. Another teaching of writing strategy is genre based. It introduces genres that students acquire. Eight genres are primarily introduced in Indonesia, i.e., recount, report, explanation, exposition, discussion, procedure, narrative, and news story. Systemic functional linguistics genre pedagogy helps to develop students' writing [11]. The introduction of written genres is encouraged since it has a good transferability chance in mixed discipline students [12]. Teaching writing in non-English departments is essential because the students need to have sufficient English writing ability to communicate with overseas partners or continue their studies, in which English competence is one of the entrance requirements. Finding a suitable teaching strategy needs to analyze the students' difficulties while writing an essay.

Writing consists of grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, and mechanics. Those complex elements make writing difficult for some English as foreign language (EFL) students. Coherence and cohesion are the most challenging academic writing skills [13]. The challenging academic writing for students is specialist (disciplinary) vocabulary [14]. The vocabulary, coherence, and cohesion are interrelated, implying that cohesive and coherent paragraphs need an appropriate vocabulary. Furthermore, a different structure with L1 enables writing more difficult for students. English has four skills, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening to learn. Speaking and writing are productive skills while reading and listening are receptive skills. Higher education students are expected to be able to speak and write appropriate. The teacher should find suitable writing teaching strategies in order to help students write better and appropriately. Nevertheless, it is essential to know students' constraints first in order to find effective teaching writing strategies.

Several previous studies have been conducted regarding students' difficulties in writing. Grammar, cohesion, and coherence are the major problem in writing essays [15], [16], logicity and clarity [13], and limited knowledge of writing aspects [17]. In addition, article errors are the highest found during online writing exchange [18], implying that article is also tricky for students. These previous studies were conducted on English department students and in online writing exchange, while the present study was conducted on agriculture students who wrote an essay. As agriculture students must write an essay related to their specific study, this area of research needs to be more researched. To fill this gap, the present study aimed to investigate the agriculture students' difficulty in writing essays.

## 2. METHOD

The research method was descriptive-qualitative design. The design was chosen because it meets the research objective. This research recruited 40 students of Agroecotechnology taking English courses. They were in the first year of their study. They took an English course (2 credits) once a week in an online environment because of the pandemic. The objective of the English course was to offer students four skills in order the students had a sufficient ability in English. The research procedures were teacher's explanation, essay assignment, and data collection and analysis as mentioned in Figure 1. Firstly, the students listened to teacher's explanation and did exercises. Secondly, the students made a group of five students, and each member of the group made one paragraph to make an essay (5 paragraphs).

The students received an explanation about writing an essay for one meeting. The students listened to the writing components and the structure of the essay. For the next three meetings, the students listened to the explanation about the writing components, i.e., determiner, tenses, compound and complex sentences, prepositions, clauses, and conjunction. The students filled out the exercises given about the materials have been explained and the exercises were short answers. The exercise helped the students to understand and apply the materials explained. The students listened to the explanation of essay structure for three meetings. The students received an explanation on how to make an introduction paragraph, main body paragraph, and concluding paragraph. Then, they were grouped into a group of five students. Each group was assigned to write an essay,

and each member was to write one paragraph. The students may get help from their peers in the group during the writing process. Next, the students were assigned to write an essay individually.

The data was obtained from the interviews and students' essays. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain deeper data. The interviews were conducted outside the class hour and recorded. The interviews were stopped when the data was saturated. The interviews were in Indonesian in order to put the interviewees at ease. The students were asked to write an essay on an agriculture topic. They wrote an essay individually and then submitted it in Google Classroom. The record of the interviews was transcribed and translated. The transcription was coded and analyzed to find the emerging theme. For data triangulation, students' essay was analyzed to categorize the students' errors. The students' errors and essay organization were used to confirm the result of the interviews. The student's essays were analyzed using grammarly software with a premium account. The grammarly software is considered objective with no bias when analyzing many essays.

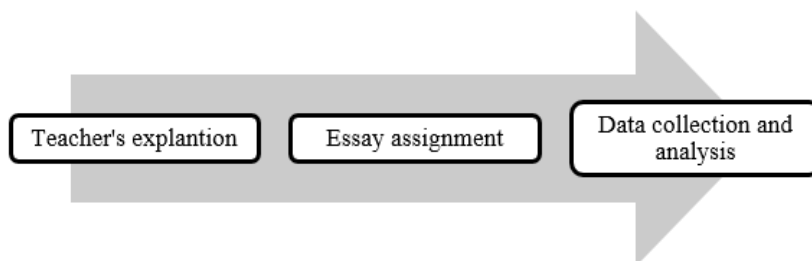


Figure 1. Research procedures

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Students' perception of writing difficulty

The perception was garnered from interviews outside the class hour. It was identified that the students' writing difficulty was divided into generating ideas, vocabulary, and grammar. Students consider Those categories problematic when they are assigned to write an essay. The first writing difficulty is generating ideas. Though, generating ideas is critical in the early stages of the writing process [19]. A student said, "My difficulty in writing an essay is finding the idea because an essay should contain facts." The students were majoring in agroecotechnology and took an English course. They were accustomed to writing an essay, yet it was in their *Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian language). In their mind, the essay should reveal a fact and need references to support their arguments. The students think carefully about what they want to write. The most topic they wrote about was agriculture-related, which was in line with their major of study. The students thoughtfully planned the idea of the essay. One of the planning components was generating ideas [20]. The students find it difficult to generate ideas. In addition, another student stated, "I browsed the internet to find references. I searched in Google". The strategy students used was to read references on the internet. The internet provides abundant text resources for EFL students [21]. They used a particular topic that was interesting to them and then found the references in a search engine to support their argument in the essay. It took longer to plan an essay because the students needed time to read the references and write the essay. University students consult the web for assignments [22].

The second writing difficulty is vocabulary. The students were challenged to find a suitable vocabulary because they wrote in L1 and then translated it into English. Students' lexical knowledge was limited because they were not majoring in the English department. They rarely used English in other classes. A student uttered, "My difficulty was finding a suitable vocabulary because writing an essay should use proper and academic language." This difficulty is likely caused by less exposure to academic texts. The students were not accustomed to reading English academic texts. Therefore, their vocabulary knowledge was considered low. Students gained vocabulary through extensive reading [23]. Students' vocabulary can be promoted by extensive reading, which results in better writing ability because their vocabulary can be expanded. Extensive reading facilitates a very high productive vocabulary used for general writing tasks [24].

The third difficulty is grammar. Writing ability is closely related to grammar knowledge. A good text contains good English. Good English meant that it has no a wrong grammar and spelling [25]. The reader may misunderstand the content of the text if the grammar used in the text is not good. Grammar knowledge plays a pivotal role in writing. The students find it difficult in grammar. As a student said, "I made mistakes in grammar like tenses because I do not understand what tense is used in a certain context." The students found it challenging to use grammar in context because they are trained for grammar usage, such as for the national exam or English proficiency test. As a result, the students do not know how to use the tense if assigned to write an essay.

### 3.2. Students' writing difficulty

The students found writing difficult, as was exhibited in their writing errors. Linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling might impact students' writing proficiency [26]. Here, the writing errors are shown in Table 1. The following table shows the top ten students' errors in their essays. Based on Table 1, punctuation in compound/complex sentence is the most occurred error (n=185) made by the students. Punctuation error is highest because the students pay less attention to the punctuation. The students pay much attention to the content of the essay [27]. Mistake in punctuation should not be made a lot because it is noticeable. Punctuation is an important component of written language because it clarifies structure and meaning and reduces ambiguity [28]. In other words, it indicates the students' writing ability. The recognition of errors in punctuation by students is not only crucial for the enhancement of their writing abilities [29]. The second biggest mistake is a wordy sentence (n=172). A wordy sentence means putting unnecessary words in the sentence, such as "in a clean condition." It contains a wordy sentence because the word "in a clean condition" can be replaced with "clean". The translating process causes the wordy sentence to be made. The students translated the essay using machine translation and relied much on machine translation. Students use translation software [30]. The quality of machine translation is still questionable, although improvement has been made. Improvement in machine translation is acceptable [31].

Table 1. Students' difficulty

| Items                                     | N (total) | Items                        | N (total) | Items                      | N (total) |
|---|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|-----------|
| Punctuation in compound/complex sentences | 185       | Determiner use               | 65        | Coma misuse within clauses | 47        |
| Wordy sentence                            | 172       | Misspelled words             | 54        | Incorrect verb forms       | 43        |
| Unclear sentence                          | 99        | Wrong or missing preposition | 48        | Conjunction use            | 28        |
| Word choice                               | 89        |                              |           |                            |           |

## 4. CONCLUSION

Writing an English text is not easy for students majoring in non-English departments. It is found that generating ideas, vocabulary, and grammar are the students' difficulties. Generating idea becomes difficult because they need to find the facts to support their argument. Vocabulary knowledge is also a student's difficulty. Finding a suitable vocabulary is considered difficult because of their lack of vocabulary. The last difficulty is grammar. The students do not know when a specific tense is used in a specific context. Furthermore, punctuation is also problematic for students as the students make the highest error. Finally, this present study implies that the teaching of writing should start with brainstorming in order to generate ideas. The teacher guides the students to produce an idea to write by asking or scaffolding questions. In addition, teaching punctuation is also crucial. The teacher should make fill out exercises for students to practice punctuation.

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
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