

Challenges in Descriptive Essay Writing: A Case of Indonesian EFL Learners

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Challenges in Descriptive Essay Writing: A Case of Indonesian EFL Learners

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Essay writing has a pivotal role in the education system. Within the context of learning English as a foreign language, essay writing is viewed as the reflection of the students' knowledge and language acquisition. This creates challenges for students of every level and background, including those learning English at the high school level. This study reports on the investigation of Indonesian students' challenges in essay writing, particularly descriptive essays. In the frame of qualitative design, this study gains the data by analysing students' essay assignments as documents for data, and interviewing them if the elaboration of the data is necessary. Students are interviewed on the basis of the following main question; how did you write your essay and what challenged you? The respondents for this study are students of the high school in North Sulawesi, whose academic achievement is high, and the students come from different regions of Indonesia. Later, they are assumed to represent the circumstances faced by most EFL learners in Indonesia. The grounded theory perspective is applied for analysing the data and presented descriptively. The findings indicate that students experience various challenges in their efforts of writing a descriptive essay such as grammatical problems, vocabulary limitations, and word choice, spelling, and idea development. This study recommends the need for regular teacher feedback, and more essay writing practices for students.

Key words: *Essay, Descriptive, Challenge, Indonesian.*



Introduction

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Writing is an important skill to be developed within the context of language learning and global knowledge transfer. This particular skill is not merely related to the use of language in communicating and negotiating meaning or ideas, but it is also concerned with the reflection of the absorption of the source of knowledge, as well as retransferring it into the written form. Further, writing skills are synthesized to be the marks of a cognitive psychological perspective, a socio-cultural perspective and a linguistic perspective (Myhill, 2009). It involves these aspects in the presentation of a writing product. That suggests the pivotal place of writing in the academic world, is more than solely a language competence. Writing is “a thinking tool” (Mohammad and Hazarika, 2016); (Bjork and Raisanen, 1997). According to Cullingford (2000), “writing is not concerned with remembering but rather, it is the link between language and thought”. It defines an acquisition of multidisciplinary knowledge and its productive transmission through language (Cullingford, 2000). Within the context of the teaching of English as a foreign language in Indonesia, it has been part of the curriculum from time to time, following the various curriculum changes in the country. In the latest curriculum, essay writing as part of the development of writing skills is considered as a medium for students to expose themselves to the English language. This is done through digging out the relevant resources for enriching the quality of the content and selecting the appropriate words with the correct grammatical rules for sharing the gained knowledge. In general, a good essay requires a strong understanding of information organization, vocabulary, language usage, and mechanics (Ariyanti, 2017).

However, writing an essay in EFL class is difficult for both native speakers and foreign learners (Haide, 2014). For a good essay, writers must be able to select the proper language to systematize ideas in the form of a well-organized work. Writing is not an easy skill to develop since it deals with communicative skills using the English language as a medium. It creates challenges for a foreign learner whose language exposure is limited or needs more practice. As afore-mentioned, foreign learners have to handle such components such as content, organization, grammar, syntax, mechanics, word choice, audience and purpose, and the ability to not ignore the writing process itself. In other words, an essay has to display clearance, fluency and effectiveness of the idea that the writer is trying to communicate. In this context, Indonesian students as foreign learners must learn to create written products that demonstrate mastery over contextually appropriate formats for the rhetorical presentation of ideas, as well as mastery in all areas of the language (Krapels, 1990). This illustrates the sophistication and challenge of essay writing.

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In Indonesia, descriptive essays are one of the genres of essays that has to be taught, beginning in Junior High School (Harmenita and Reszy, 2013). It is further explained that descriptive essays are included in the curriculum of EFL class as it helps students to



8 develop their communication skills and allows students to engage with literacy to further develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It bridges the formation of basic study skills required for understanding what students observe and think, and how they convey it in their own words. Students illustrate an image and translate it to readers using their linguistics and contextual knowledge. In doing so, descriptive essay writing turns to be a challenging activity for students with varying levels of English knowledge, despite occupying one classroom. It arises curiosity towards what situations challenges arise in the learning of descriptive essay writing in EFL classes.

This study aims at reporting a qualitative study on the challenges in students' descriptive essay writing. It is pivotal to figure out the challenges that students experience in their writing process. The understanding of students' challenge(s) in their essay writing, particularly in descriptive essays, will be of use to formulate strategies to assist them to increase their academic achievement, to design a suitable learning method to improve students' basic writing skills, and to trigger and encourage students' habits of thinking, organizing ideas, and developing critical thinking abilities. Hence, this research focuses on identifying and illustrating the common challenges students face in writing descriptive essays, by relying upon the results of the study that focuses on Indonesian students as EFL learners. It is intended to discover writing challenges and suggest ways of overcoming them.

Literary Review

Writing in English has always been a challenge for Indonesian students as foreign learners of English and also, those in other Asian countries (Suriyanti and Yaacob, 2016). Students have to meet and tackle problems of English structure, the limited choice of words, content development, and the influence of socio-culture and 13 communication perspective (Ghabool et al., 2012). Writing can cause problems for students, as shown by errors made in both of the organizing of the composition of writing and the language used (Silalahi, 2016). Yet, these circumstances do not eliminate the inclusion of essay writing 8; in the English subject taught in Indonesian schools. The Indonesian government stipulate 6 English as a compulsory subject in schools. According to the Government Regulation (32, 2013), English is one of the compulsory subjects which is taught from the first year of junior high school to the university level. As a compulsory subject, English as a subject taught in Indonesian schools, has to address the development of four integrated basic skills such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

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Having no intention to ignore other skills, writing occupies a crucial role in language learning. The skill of writing needs to be learned and mastered by students. Students' achievement's in writing can be used as indicators for academic progress and their communication ability, as well as knowledge transmission. When one writes, they are not



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only selecting useful language, but they are also selecting information to be presented, whilst considering the purpose of writing. In other words, writing is a process of managing information and knowledge, and is a process of formulating and organizing the way it reaches readers. Students' writing must "demonstrate mastery over contextually appropriate formats for the rhetorical presentation of ideas as well as mastery in all areas of language" (Krapels, 1990). That means that the skill of writing is important for both language learning and academic assessment. A good piece of writing goes beyond the layer of linguistics components, it has multi layers of knowledge and perspectives. In writing, students deal with "finding out ideas and assembling them into coherent discourse, conforming to social conventions underlying written discourse, in order to perform an act of communication" (Bouyakoub - Bouabdallah, n.d). At this point, language learning is practiced and the learning process is activated.

Writing an essay is part of the writing activities that are taught in the EFL classroom. Descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative writings are the four most common types of writing (Suriyanti and Yaacob, 2016). Among these four genres descriptive essay writing is the most basic form of writing. It describes sensory experiences such as, the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, along with the figurative language that is associated with it. Visualizing people, places and things in detail seems to be the essence of descriptive essays. It is considered as being simple for an academic discourse, yet it is "fundamental and the best way to lay the foundation of the writer's craft" (Meyers, 2009). It is pivotal due to its process of writing which may also relate to other genres or types essays. Describing an object in a specific and vivid mode requires and prescribes accuracy not only in its medium of expression, but also in its systematic arrangement so that readers may sense the presence of the object and its qualities. Teaching descriptive essay writing is admittedly not easy. However, the curriculum in Indonesia requires students to be able to write some kind of texts, including a descriptive one (Masitoh and Suprijadi, 2015). The ability to write a descriptive text is viewed as the readiness for global interaction and communication, and for science and technology absorption and transfer. This phenomenon underlines the need for the deep understanding of the challenges that students face in their engagement with descriptive essay writing. It is true that some studies (Harmenita and Reszy, 2013); (Inderawati et al., 2018); (Adriyati and Wienny, 2004); (Masitoh and Suprijadi, 2015) have been carried out in order to improve the descriptive writing skills, but the fundamental issue in fact deals with more efforts to map students' common problems or challenges in their learning of essay writing. There is urgency in the need for designing new strategies in the learning process for both students and teachers, and also there is a need for more breakthroughs in the field of language teaching.



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Method

In the frame of qualitative design, this study gains data by analyzing students' essay assignments as documents for data, and then interviews them if any elaboration of the data is necessary. In the interview stage, students as respondents are asked to respond to the following main question; how did you write your essay and what challenged you? The respondents for this study are students of a particular prominent high school namely SMA Lokon St. Nikolaus in Tomohon, North Sulawesi, whose academic achievement is high, the students come from different regions of Indonesia and the location wherein one of the researchers did teaching practice (PPL). Later, they are assumed to represent the circumstances faced by most EFL learners in Indonesia. The grounded theory perspective is applied for analyzing the data and presented descriptively. Students' errors are viewed and coded as the reflection of their challenges while the results of interview session are coded to clarify and confirm, as well as to predict the ways of overcoming the challenges.

Result and Discussion

Results

This study involved students of the tenth grade in one of the prominent high schools in Tomohon, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. There were 20 students from Social and Science Classes. They were purposively regarded as the representatives of the two majors in their school due to their achievement. The students were instructed to write a simple descriptive essay of 100 – 250 words on "A description of my own hometown/village". Students' essays were then analyzed and coded in order to figure out the challenges that students faced when producing their descriptive essay. For the discussion, interviews were carried out to elaborate on the findings. The challenges traced through students' essays are as follows. Students mistakes were in different forms that related to grammatical errors, wrong choices of words, and spelling problems, as well as content development. Within this analysis, only a few selected and the most vivid mistakes assumed as the main data are presented and discussed. The challenges are indicated by the combination of initial of students' number as subject with the mistake they made.

Grammatical Challenges

a. The Inappropriate usage of preposition

Subject : 5
Incorrect : I live to Timika City
Correction : I live in Timika City

In this sentence the respondent inserted "to" as the preposition. This error relates to usage or



selection of preposition. By inserting “to” in the sentence “I live to Timika City” is wrong. Preposition “to” describes a process “on going” meanwhile preposition “in” describes a place.

b. The b. Inappropriate usage of “to be”

Subject : 3

Incorrect : Kuala Kencana and Tembapapura is beautiful city.

Correction : Kuala Kencana and Tembapapura are beautiful cities.

The sentence “Kuala Kencana and Tembapapura is beautiful city” is found as an incorrect sentence because of the inappropriate usage of “is” in the sentence which has a plural subject (Azar, 2003). The usage of “is” only appropriate when the subject of a sentence is singular. Therefore, it should be “Kuala Kencana and Tembapapura are beautiful cities”.

c. Error of omission

Subject : 1

Incorrect : I live Tomohon City

Correction : I live in Tomohon City

The error related to the omission is also found in students’ essays. Omission is ¹¹the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed phrase or sentence (Dulay et al., 1982). Therefore, the ¹¹sentence “I live Tomohon City” is omitted “in”. It should be “I live in Tomohon City”.

d. Error of addition

Subject : 2

Incorrect : You can see a many trees

Correction : You can see many trees

In this statement “you can see a many trees”, the insertion of “a” is not necessary. ¹⁰The opposite of omission is addition. Addition is a presence of an item, which does not appear in a well-formed utterance (Dulay et al., 1982). Therefore, in this statement should be “you can see many trees”.

e. Error of disordering

Subject : 9

Incorrect : I want to learn in university international

Correction : I want to learn in an international university

It seems to be difficult for the students to use a correct order of a noun phrase in a sentence. In this context the sentence “I want to learn in university international” indicates the incorrect order of phrase which is called “disordering (Dulay et al., 1982)”. Therefore, the sentence



should be “I want to learn in an international university”.

f. Inappropriate usage of verb selection

Subject : 12

Incorrect : Laikit have three elementary Schools.

Correction : Laikit has three elementary Schools.

The sentence “Laikit have three elementary Schools” has the inappropriate usage of the verb selection. Based on present perfect tense formula, the usage of have and has are different. The word “has” corresponds with “He, She, It”. Meanwhile verb “have” is only for “I, You, We, They”. In this sentence “Laikit” as the name of a place which is refer to pronoun of singular thing or object which requires singular auxiliary that is “has”. Therefore, it should be “Laikit has three elementary Schools”.

g. Inappropriate usage of infinitive

Subject : 20

Incorrect : Sometimes I really want to moved from this city.

Correction : Sometimes I really want to move from this city.

In this sentence the subject adds “d” in the word “to moved”. An infinitive is basic form of a verb that usually follows “to” (Azar, 2003). It means that sentence “Sometimes I really want to moved from this city” is considered being an incorrect sentence. Therefore, the correct one should be “Sometimes I really want to move from this city”.

h. Inappropriate usage of personal pronoun

Subject : 18

Incorrect : There are lot of butterfly species. It is beautiful

Correction : There are a lot of butterfly species. They are beautiful

“It” describes singular subject pronoun meanwhile “they” describes plural subject pronoun. Thus, the correct form should be “There are a lot of butterfly species. They are beautiful”.

Word Choice Challenges

Subject	Errors	Note
S2	<i>I live with my parents from child</i>	Preposition: since
S13	<i>There is a statue of writing of Benteng Moraya</i>	Past Tense: Wrote



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S14	<i>I can make everything in my home</i>	Verb: do
S15	<i>Biak is a little city</i>	Adjective : small

a. Inappropriate usage of adjective

Subject : 15

Incorrect : Biak is a little city

Correction : Biak is a small city

The word “little” indicates the quantity or total amount of something meanwhile the word “small” describes the size of something. In other words, "little" is used as a quantifier, denoting the amount of something, whereas "small" denotes size. Within this context, the respondent means the size of the city compared to another city. Therefore, the sentence “Biak is little city” is regarded as the inappropriate word choice selection. It should be “Biak is a small city” indicating the size of Biak.

b. Inappropriate usage of verb selection

Subject : 14

Incorrect : I can make everything in my home

Correction : I can do everything in my home

There are two differences between “make” and “do”. The word “make” means forming something by putting parts together or mixing substances, meanwhile “do” means carrying out or completing an action, duty or task. Therefore, sentence “I can make everything in my home” is categorized as the inappropriate usage of verb selection. It should be “I can do everything in my home” because the word “do” describes an action.

c. Inappropriate usage of tense

Subject : 5

Incorrect : There is a statue writing of Benteng Moraya.

Correction : There is a statue written Benteng Moraya.

The sentence “There is a statue writing of Benteng Moraya” is found as incorrect sentence because the word “writing” was written in present continuous tense. Therefore, it should be written in past participle form “written”. The correction should be “There is a statue written Benteng Moraya.”

d. Inappropriate usage of preposition



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Subject : 2
Incorrect : I live with my parents from child.
Correction : I have lived with my parents since a child.3

Both “Since” and “from” are prepositions that can be used to indicate a specific time period or the starting point of an action, event or a state of being, or time at which a journey, process, or action starts. Yet, they are used differently and are not interchangeably used. “From” usually suggests a finished action or an action that is in the future. “Since” can only be applied for perfect tenses, whereas from can be applied for any tense. In this context, the sentence “I live with my parents from child” must be corrected into “I have lived with my parents since a child.”

Mechanics Challenges

Subject	Errors	Note
S3	<i>Tembagapura city is beautifull.</i>	Addition: beautiful
S6	<i>Kuala Kencana is city in the middle of folest.</i>	Incorrect letter: forest
S9	<i>I com from Timika Papua</i>	Lack of Letter: come
S14	<i>My neighbor is my granmom.</i>	Incorrect word: grandmother

a. Incorrect letter

Subject : 6
Incorrect : Kuala Kencana is city in the middle of folest
Correction : Kuala Kencana is city in the middle of forest

In this sentence, the respondent uses “l” for the word “folest” which is the incorrect spelling of the word. Therefore, the word “forest” should be used, “Kuala Kencana is city in the middle of forest”.

b. Lack of a letter

Subject : 9
Incorrect : “I com from Timika Papua”
Correction : I come from Timika Papua.



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The word “com” has no meaning in English, because it is an incorrect spelling. The sentence “I com from Timika Papua” should be corrected to “I come from Timika Papua” as a complete sentence.

c. Incorrect word

Subject : 14

Incorrect : My neighbour is my granmom.

Correction : My neighbour is my grandmother.

English Spelling really challenges the respondents as indicated in above sentence “My neighbour is my granmom”. The word “granmom” is categorized as an incorrect word which has no meaning. Therefore, it should be “grandmother” as the correct word. Hence, it becomes “My neighbour is my grandmother”.

d. Additional letter

Subject : 3

Incorrect : Tembagapura city is beautifull

Correction : Tembagapura city is beautiful.

The word “beautifull” is supposed to be spelled “beautiful” without additional letter “L”. But, in this sentence the respondent wrote “double L” which is wrong. Therefore, the correct sentence should be “Tembagapura city is beautiful”.

Discussion

Having revealed the patterns of the challenges, further investigation is carried out to elaborate the reasons behind the tendencies of making the mistakes. For that purpose, interviews were performed by asking students how they wrote their essay and what was behind their errors, this is discussed below.

a. Grammatical Challenge

Language skills are the product of habitual actions. When a language is rarely used or practiced, it is almost impossible to expect the acquisition of fluency. Students of the high school seem to face this issue. They are assigned with essay writing which is assumed to be “the most difficult skill among the four language skills” (Mirlohi et al., 2012). Following the curriculum, students are required to be able to write, yet they are not really prepared for such activity. “I feel that writing is a problem, I don’t write very often even in Bahasa Indonesia subject” (S3). This response determines the students’ situations in the classroom. They do not have enough experience or practice with the language to write an essay. Students appear to



lack the exposure of writing in even their own mother tongue or first language. Grab and Kalan (1996), argued that writing does not come naturally but is rather gained through continuous efforts and much practice. This means that good essay writing will only be achieved by doing more essay practice.

Practicing writing does not only mean to go through the process of structuring sentences and organizing ideas, but also having the opportunity to gain feedback from their teachers and peers. Zamel (1985) stated, “teacher’s feedback can be effective if teachers respond to students writing as genuine and interested readers rather than as judges and evaluators.” Feedback both direct and indirect, helps students to improve the quality of their writing including in linguistics and cognitive aspects. As they rarely practice, students rarely get feedback. Through feedback, students learn and expose themselves to target language and its rules, and to form the habit of communicating ideas and negotiating meanings. Therefore, teachers should engage students with more activities that drive and stimulate students to write. To motivate students, a writing teacher should include comments of praise and encouragement in the written feedback. If teachers see their students’ response as the end of the interaction, then students will stop there. However, if the response includes specific direction on what to do next, there is a chance for the application of principles (Alfaki, 2015). It indicates that feedback can also be a chance to motivate students in the teaching of writing. Correction, encouragement and praise can come as one, motivating and improving the package of learning. “We sometimes do not like to write because of the topic, we do not know the topic or it is not interesting”, admitted one of the respondents (S7). An interesting topic and strategy might be offered to push students’ curiosity and interest to take part in the writing activity. Writing tasks must be designed not solely as an assignment to complete, but as a form of entertainment to enjoy. This may establish positive attitude toward the activity of writing. It does motivate students. Davies (1988) states that learners will be encouraged to write if the writing task motivates them and keep them interested. One of the ways to create such situation is by providing a relevant and familiar context on the topics that are written about. It is synthesized that for all ages and levels, motivation is increased if writing is placed in a realistic context (Pincas, 1982). It implies that familiarity can be a factor that assists the development of students’ writing skill. When students’ concerns and interests are acknowledged, they are open to participate in the writing activities and ready to explore and express themselves in the target language.

b. Word Choice Challenge

Choosing proper words to express ideas in writing constitutes one of the basic challenges. Students find problems in delivering their ideas as the words from their own language leave them confused. “It is not only Grammar is difficult but also the words, not only how to use them but also what to use”, said the respondent (S20). These words imply that, in the case of



diction, students face lack of vocabulary in conveying their ideas. They are trapped in stagnancy of both the stock of words to use and the ways to put the words into a meaningful construction to create an engaging piece of writing. Although limited vocabulary has been a common problem for students as foreign learners (Harmentita and Reszy, 2013), there is no solid solution for such limitation, instead of practicing and exposing students to the target language. The decision to pick up correct and proper words to communicate ideas in a writing activity relates to both the frequency of practicing using the words and of practicing writing the words in the organizational structure. It deals with more comprehensive works, namely lexical meaning and function. It can be said that understanding the nuance of the words and categories helps students to meet a good essay output. This explains that teachers of writing are obliged to prepare students to enrich their vocabularies and use them for writing.

c. Spelling Challenge

The accuracy of spelling influences the accuracy of meaning, and later the quality of an essay. The failure to correctly spell words in writing can have negative impacts on the intended meaning of the writing. It affects the communicative aspects of a piece of writing. This circumstance frequently occurs to students as English foreign learners. In the case of the respondents, a similar situation seems to occur in students' writing activity. "I got corrections on my spellings, I made several errors in writing words, sometimes, I forget that it is English, I wrote as Indonesian, writing a word as it is read.", clarified the respondent (S12). This confession indicates that the spelling problem may stem from the unfamiliarity of students towards the English spelling system. The English writing system is based on word form and not pronunciation, and the relationship between sound and symbol is arbitrary and not a clear relationship of one sound to one symbol [25]. Students find it difficult to transform from their own Indonesian spellings to those of the foreign language which has linguistic distance. The knowledge of students' first language or mother tongue intrudes their way of writing words of the target language. Bereikhi and Mekhlafi (2016), affirmed that Students of English of Foreign Language potentially experience this phenomenon. Thus, students' confusion can actually be interpreted as a challenge for teachers to assign more exercises and exposures relating to improvement of the English word spelling. In other words, errors in spelling can be viewed as "a sign of education," (Subhi and Yasin, 2015), which means that it reflects the quality of language acquisition and process of foreign language learning.

d. Idea development

Idea development is fundamental aspect for the quality of an essay. In this study, students' essays also implied that students face difficulty in developing and communicating their ideas. They seemed to be unable to produce more words. Most of the essays consisted of only three



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to four sentences which is very few for high school students. In academic writing, paragraphs usually consist of 100 – 200 words. While in the students' text, it was found that some of them were unable to write more than 100 words in one paragraph. "To be honest sir, our problem in finishing the essay is not only the language but also the way to develop our idea, we think twice at the same time, thinking the words to use, and thinking its presentation. It's hard", uttered the respondent (S5). This data points out that although students have already been given the topic for their essay, they struggled to generate the relevant ideas to develop the essay, not to mention the possibility of disliking the topic. Describing a hometown is actually an easy topic to write about, however students had problems in uniting and organizing the details. They may know what details can be attributed to their hometown, but challenge comes as they gather and connect them. Arranging and linking the descriptive details of the hometown creates a serious issue to address after being puzzled by the grammar and vocabularies. The lesson from such circumstances shows the demand for teachers to apply more helpful strategies and to stimulate students' creativity by providing interesting topics and exercises, as well as to suggest more readings from which students can gain examples of idea development and encounter a variety of language features.

Conclusion

As foreign learners, students find some challenges in descriptive essay writing such as grammatical challenges, vocabulary challenges, and mechanics challenges, as well as their idea development. These challenges are apparently related to some aspects such as a lack of motivation, lack of practice, lack of language exposure, lack of feedbacks, and a lack of reading. These aspects challenge the teachers' role in the teaching of essay writing in the EFL classroom. Further researches on addressing strategic breakthroughs in overcoming the challenge and its causes are recommended to be carried out in the future.

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