

ESL Foundation Learners' Difficulties and Strategies Applied in Writing Argumentative Essay Online

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ABSTRACT

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Writing is perceived as one the most difficult skills to learn and acquire since learners need to produce a piece of writing where information is systematically in order and easily understood by the readers. Hence, during the process of acquiring the skill in writing, language learners face various difficulties that can cause them to become demotivated and frustrated during writing lessons. Therefore, this study is conducted to determine some of the difficulties faced by ESL foundation learners when they are assigned online writing argumentative essays and strategies applied to overcome the difficulties. This study employed a qualitative method and a semi-structured interview was conducted with 6 second semester ESL foundation learners to identify the difficulties faced by them in online writing argumentative essays. This study also aims to know strategies applied by these learners in order to overcome the difficulties faced by them in online writing argumentative essays. The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents experienced difficulty in generating ideas to write in their online argumentative essay and the majority of them believed that brainstorming activity helps them to overcome the difficulty. Thus, it is important for ESL foundation learners to be exposed to the writing process before they are assigned to essay writing in order to overcome their main difficulty in writing which is to generate ideas for their essay.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In learning a language, mastering the four main skills namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening is considered as an advantage for learners. However, based on past research, out of the four skills, learners at higher institutions deemed that writing is the most crucial skill that they need to acquire and excel at as it will help them to perform well in their academic. Hence, tertiary learners are highly encouraged by educators to improve and enhance their skill writing (Al Khazraji, 2019) because with a good command of writing, learners will be able to express their ideas, opinions, thoughts, feelings as well as arguments in the written form successfully. However, the process of determining and presenting ideas logically and sensibly in writing is not a walk in the park especially among learners with low proficiency levels in English (Srinawati & Alwi, 2020). Writing is perceived as one of the most difficult skills to learn and acquire among EFL learners (Najmi, 2015) since they need to produce a piece of writing where information is systematically in order and easily understood by the readers.

Even in the 21st-century language learning, mastering and acquiring the writing skill has still become an onerous effort among language learners (Bulqiyah et. al., 2021). Writing itself is perceived as a system that is not easily acquired and language learners are encouraged to learn writing through constant conscious effort. Moses and Mohamed (2020) stated that learning writing has become difficult among ESL learners in higher education due to some of the obstacles faced by learners such as lack of vocabulary, poor grammar and spelling, and, inadequate ideas to write. Thus, these difficulties can lead ESL learners to become demotivated, and uninterested, and affect their readiness in writing lessons. Habibi et al., (2017) shared a similar view that difficulties faced by EFL learners in writing caused learners to become very frustrated which then affected their performance in their assignments and examinations.

Despite all of the difficulties faced by ESL learners in acquiring essay writing skills, language learners particularly in tertiary education have been working hard to enhance their writing skill since they are required to be able to write and produce a well-written essay (Bulqiyah et al., 2021). Within the university context, ESL tertiary learners have to deal with different types of essays including discursive, problem-solutions, argumentative, and many more. Dang et. al., (2020) stated that in higher institution learning, the argumentative essay is a common type of essay for learners to write and they should be able to write it well to persuade readers to agree with their stance on certain topics and argumentative essay act as one of the tools to portray their maturity in thinking. Dang et al., (2020) also emphasized that being able to write a good argumentative essay increased learners' chances to succeed in both academics and at the workplace later.

However, the argumentative essay is one of the hardest types of essays to write (Ferretti et al., 2007; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008) and many ESL learners experience difficulties when they are assigned to this type of essay. Most ESL learners struggle to write a good argumentative essay particularly when they need to produce arguments with clear supporting evidence and refutations that can convince readers to agree with their point of view (Dang et. al., 2020). Apart from that, Latifi et. al., (2020) mentioned that linguistic competence such as vocabulary, grammar, coherence, as well as background knowledge are also factors that can affect ESL tertiary learners' ability to write a good argumentative essay.

Considering the importance of writing to ESL tertiary learners, to deal with ESL learners' difficulties in essay writing, it takes efforts from both educators and learners so that a positive and effective teaching and learning atmosphere can exist in writing classrooms (Zhafirah &

Hamzah, 2022). A study conducted by Singh (2017) revealed that some of the strategies used by ESL learners to overcome their difficulties in writing essays are; utilizing correct writing techniques or applying certain writing techniques when they need to write essays, employing writing tools such as grammar and spelling checker to assist their writing, and enhancing their writing skill through writing practices. As for ESL educators, one of the strategies applied is through question strategy (Zhafirah & Hamzah, 2022). By applying this strategy, educators will encourage learners to think and strengthen their understanding of the topic through questions that can further help learners generate ideas to write. Apart from that, previous studies also revealed that peer discussion, group discussion, and brainstorming are some of the techniques applied by ESL educators to help learners overcome their difficulties in writing.

It is no doubt that studies on difficulties faced by ESL learners in writing essays as well as strategies employed by both ESL educators and learners to overcome the difficulties have been mushrooming in many different educational settings. However, studies on difficulties in writing essays encountered by ESL foundation learners in Malaysia, particularly in online writing argumentative essays, and strategies used to overcome the difficulties are still limited. Therefore, this recent study aims to understand the difficulties faced by ESL foundation learners when they are assigned online to write argumentative essays and determine some of the strategies that learners employ in overcoming the difficulties. The findings of this study might also enable ESL educators to plan and apply appropriate teaching strategies that can be used in order to assist ESL foundation learners in online writing argumentative essays.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brown (2001) claimed that writing is a thinking process that requires proper planning and an unlimited number of revisions before an individual can acquire the skill to write. Writing requires mental work of creating, expressing, and organising ideas into statements and paragraphs that will be clear for a reader to comprehend. In higher institutions, having good skills in writing is crucial for learners to succeed in their learning since essay writing particularly argumentative essays is one of the common assignments in tertiary education (Dang et. al., 2020; Umar & Rathakrishnan, 2012).

There are a lot of definitions of argumentative essays mentioned by different researchers. Dang et. al., (2020) define an argumentative essay as a kind of essay that revolves around a strong and clear thesis statement where a writer needs to convince readers to accept or agree with his/her point of view over a controversial topic or issue. When writing an argumentative essay, it is crucial for a writer to have a clear stand, anticipate readers' opposing ideas, be able to refute ideas, and most importantly provide sufficient supporting evidence to convince the readers to have a similar stance with him/her (Chase, 2011). Based on the definitions mentioned, hence, it can be concluded that writing an argumentative essay is challenging especially among language learners since it is cognitively demanding.

Since writing an argumentative essay is perceived as a difficult skill for native as well as non-native speakers to acquire (Rass, 2015) in ESL writing classrooms, educators have constantly been finding and working on methods to teach writing effectively. With the fast-changing of technological tools, it is highly encouraged for educators to learn and integrate technology in teaching and learning to enrich both the contents as well as educational activities (Dung, 2020), particularly in writing classrooms. By integrating technology and allowing learners to write online, it helps to improve learners' writing output (Shin et. al., 2021). In a study conducted by Rasulmetova and Kamiljanova (2022), online writing improves learners'

writing achievement when they begin to use higher language and complex sentences in their essay writing as compared to hand-written essays.

Although the use of technology to some extent helps ESL learners to improve and enhance their skill in writing, can technology also help to minimise certain difficulties faced by ESL learners in writing? Do learners consider technology as one of the strategies to overcome their difficulties in writing especially argumentative essays? The next section discusses difficulties in writing an argumentative essay among ESL learners along with strategies used to overcome those difficulties.

2.1 Difficulties in Writing an Argumentative Essay

Based on past studies, ESL learners at the tertiary level experienced numerous difficulties in writing argumentative essays. One of them is related to cognitive problems which is to generate ideas to write an argumentative essay (Bulqiyah et al., 2020; Ceylan, 2019) although writing is a skill that requires an individual to communicate one's ideas in a written form. Bulqiyah et al., (2020) also revealed that the difficulty faced by ESL learners in generating ideas to write an argumentative essay is partly due to teaching strategies applied by ESL educators in writing classrooms which might not be effective for some learners. In another study conducted by Latifi et. al., (2020), some language learners find it challenging for them to generate clear ideas for their main claim, and evidence to support and counter-arguments against the main claim. Thus, due to learners' difficulty in generating ideas when writing an argumentative essay, hence, it is tough for language learners to produce such sound argumentation and solid reasoning in their argumentative essay (Latifi et. al., 2020; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009).

Concurring with the findings from Latifi et. al., (2020)'s study, Dang et al., (2020) stated that a lack of ideas to write an argumentative essay will result in learners making unsubstantiated claims that may or may not be relevant to the essay's topic. Dang et al., (2020) further added that lack of ideas is associated with learners' limited knowledge that resulted in learners' inability to express their thoughts or opinions about new topics or issues. Hence, language learners must identify certain strategies that are helpful especially those strategies that can help them to generate ideas to write an argumentative essay.

Another difficulty faced by ESL learners in writing an argumentative essay is their readiness to write the essay. It is important for learners to be well-prepared to be able to complete their writing within the stipulated time (Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Winarto, 2016). Since writing an argumentative essay is a tough task for majority of the ESL learners, ESL educators need to prepare learners either physically or mentally before presenting them with the writing task. Foster (2015) stated that motivating and attracting learners' attention will benefit them as learners are ready to write and finish their writing.

2.2 Strategies to Overcome Difficulties in Writing

Learners' strategies in writing are one of the contributing factors that can affect their writing process and production significantly. This is supported by Bulqiyah et. al., (2021); Winarto, (2015) that writing strategies applied by EFL learners have a greater influence on their performance in essay writing.

Ambarwati and Listyani (2021) mentioned that creating an outline is a step that learners can take before they begin to write. An outline is perceived as a blueprint as it shows the division

and subdivision of an essay, the order of ideas, and also the relationship between the main idea as well as supporting details (Kartawijaya, 2018). An outline will ‘force’ learners to list the ideas that are associated with the essay topic and hence will lead to a better composition as an outline will ensure that learners will stick to the ideas (Oshima & Hogue, 2009). Furthermore, writing an outline helps in generating ideas as learners will need to brainstorm and organise their ideas and thoughts to write their essays later (Ambarwati & Listyani, 2020; Al Amsari, 2013; Chai, 2006). A similar finding was revealed by Maarof and Murat (2013) that writing an outline is beneficial for learners as it has the potential to help learners overcome their difficulties in essay writing particularly in generating ideas to write in their essays. Nasution et. al., (2020) that the brainstorming process while writing an outline helps to prepare learners to write better as they are required to read, discuss and write on the essay topic assigned to them. Brainstorming is part of mental exercise as learners will make use of background schemata as well as discover new ideas to write their essays (Minawati, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, research ethics were applied and approved before the researchers began to conduct the semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected based on non-random sampling since the researchers had determined the criteria before the study was conducted. 6 ESL foundation learners from one of the centres of foundation studies, enrolled in the law course were selected to provide their views on the difficulties in online writing an argumentative essay and strategies applied to deal with those difficulties. According to Dworkin (2012), when it comes to qualitative research, most articles, book chapters, and books recommend from 5 to 50 participants as adequate for interviews. Therefore, 6 respondents were selected to be interviewed in this study in order to have an in-depth understanding of the difficulties they faced in writing and strategies used to overcome the difficulties. Not only that, these 6 respondents were selected based on the criteria below;

- 1) they were second-semester learners and enrolled in the English course offered by the centre,
- 2) they have experience in online distance learning (ODL), and finally
- 3) they have learned about how to write an argumentative essay during their first semester.

Prior to the interview session, these learners were assigned to write an argumentative essay titled ‘Talent is more important than hard work. Do you agree with this statement?’. They need to complete the essay online for forty-five minutes and submit the essay through Google Classroom. Once they were done with their online writing, these learners were interviewed individually in order to give them more time to freely express their opinions.

A semi-structured interview was used as the main instrument in the study. Two open-ended interview questions were asked to gauge learners’ experience in online writing argumentative essays. The questions are;

1. What are the difficulties faced by ESL foundation learners when performing online writing argumentative essays?
2. What are strategies applied by ESL foundation learners to overcome the difficulties faced when performing online writing argumentative essays?

Following the inductive process, data gathered from the interviews were analysed manually in order to answer both of the research questions. While analysing the data, all transcripts were reviewed repetitively to identify the potential meanings of the raw data. Later, relevant themes were developed from the responses received from all of the participants.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The findings from the interview are presented based on the themes developed from responses gathered from all of the 6 participants. All of the participants were asked about difficulties that they experienced with online writing argumentative essay and also strategies they applied to overcome the difficulties and next section discusses the findings from the interviews.

4.1 Difficulties Faced by ESL Foundation Learners in Online Writing Argumentative Essay

Based on the responds from all of the participants, there are three biggest difficulties ESL foundation learners have to endure which are; surroundings, time allocation, and lack of ideas.

4.1.1 Surrounding and Time Allocated

3 of the respondents, **Respondent B**, **Respondent C**, and **Respondent E**, mentioned that their surroundings and time allocated to complete the essay are two of their biggest challenges when completing the online argumentative essay.

“I have lots of ideas to write but it is such a challenge when I have small siblings and they keep on disturbing me when I am writing... and yes, forty-five minutes is too short for me. I was struggling to complete the essay” – Respondent E

Respondent E also shared a similar situation and even acknowledged that online learning is tough and demanding as compared to physical learning.

“My biggest challenge is my surroundings...I have lots of ideas, but I get distracted with my surroundings. I realized that online learning makes me easily lose focus compared to face-to-face. I know for sure if I am in a proper classroom, I can finish writing the essay compared to when I am writing the essay online” – Respondent B

As for **Respondent C**, the only difficulty experienced with online writing argumentative essays is insufficient time to complete the task.

“I do not have enough time to complete the essay. I wish I had more time to write” – Respondent C

4.1.2 Generating of Ideas

For **Respondent A**, **Respondent D**, and **Respondent F**, generating ideas to relate and to support their arguments is the ultimate challenge they need to complete their online writing argumentative essay.

“I am having such a hard time to choose and come out with ideas to support my arguments. It is just hard because I feel both are important” – Respondent A

Respondent D and **Respondent F** stated that lack of ideas to write indirectly affect the quality of their argumentative essay.

“I don’t know what to write and I ended changing my choice... And I write halfway, I change my stand again because I don’t think I can support my arguments very well” – Respondent F

“I don’t think I write a good argumentative essay because I have no ideas. I don’t think I have good mark for task fulfilment. Everything seems unrelatable to me” – Respondent D

It can be concluded that among the main difficulties faced by ESL foundation learners was the environment of completing the essay online and also to generate relevant arguments for the argumentative essay. Atikasari and Akhmad Multazim (2019) agreed that generating ideas is indeed one of the major difficulties faced by second language learners and among the causes is time allocation to write and to practice writing. The next part will discuss the strategies used by the learners to overcome such difficulties.

4.2 Strategies Applied to Overcome the Difficulties in Online Writing Argumentative Essay

From the interviews conducted, the researchers also managed to learn about strategies employed by the ESL foundation learners that specifically help them generate ideas to write in their online argumentative essays. Some of the strategies applied by the respondents are as below.

4.2.1 Brainstorming Technique

Respondent F stated that lack of ideas is the biggest challenge faced when writing an argumentative essay and therefore, he makes use of brainstorming activity using WH-Questions before beginning with the online argumentative essay.

“When I brainstorm my ideas, I use WH-questions. This is a helpful strategy for me so far before I write any types of essays since I was in high school” – Respondent F

If **Respondent F** believed that making use of WH-questions during brainstorming sessions is effective in getting and generating ideas when performing an online writing argumentative essay, **Respondent E** mentioned that searching for quotes related to the essay’s topic during brainstorming activity helps when there is a need to write an online writing argumentative essay.

“I always search for quotes online during the brainstorming session and use whichever that is related to the topic. I think this is another reason why forty-five minutes is not enough for me to write the essay assigned to me” – Respondent E

Although the strategy used by **Respondent E** is not related to the difficulty faced in online writing argumentative essays, it was acknowledged that the strategy applied might be one of the contributing factors that caused the struggle to finish the task within the stipulated time.

4.2.2 The Use of Real-Life Experience and Schemata Background Knowledge

As for **Respondent A**, the use of real-life experience and schemata background knowledge are helpful ways before the beginning to write and in overcoming difficulty in finding ideas to use in the online writing argumentative essay.

“I will relate the situation with my experience or knowledge that I have on the issue. If I never encounter such situation, then I will google and read about the situation or issue so that I have the knowledge and ideas to write” – Respondent A

4.2.3 SAKURA Writing Technique

Respondent B mentioned that ideas are not the main difficulty in online writing an argumentative essay, but he shared one of the strategies he used when he had to write the argumentative essay which is, the SAKURA writing technique.

“I use SAKURA writing technique since high school and it is proven that I get good marks for my essay. But this technique is actually for essays that I need to write in Bahasa Melayu, but I use it for English essay nevertheless as it helps me a lot” – Respondent B

This technique requires a writer to understand three elements of an essay before a person begins to write any type of essay. These elements are the essay's instruction, the essay's requirement, and lastly the writing of the essay.

As for both **Respondent C** and **Respondent D**, writing the essay immediately helped them generate ideas and complete the task on time.

"I just write the essay without thinking of whether the ideas are interrelated, or my grammar is correct. I will check my essay once I am done writing only if I have the time to do so" – Respondent C

"Just write the essay. The ideas will come as I keep on writing" – Respondent D

5. DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed that the main difficulty faced by the majority of the ESL foundation learners in online writing argumentative essays is to generate ideas to write which is agreed by **Respondent A**, **Respondent D**, and **Respondent F**. This finding is similar to previous studies conducted by Latifi et. al. (2020) as well as by Dang et. al., (2020) which indicated that most of the language learners are struggling to generate ideas when they need to write an argumentative essay. Knudson (1992) associated difficulty in generating ideas to write an argumentative essay with a lack of background knowledge of the topic that learners need to write. Limited background knowledge on the topic will further cause language learners to produce arguments that may not be logical and irrelevant to the proposition, warrant, or opposition when writing an argumentative essay. As for Moses and Mohamed (2019), ESL learners' difficulty in generating ideas to write an argumentative essay might be due to a lack of reading and exposure to various reading sources and hence they are struggling to produce great ideas in their writing as well as their vocabulary are limited that makes it hard to produce a well-written argumentative essay. Based on the situation experienced by these ESL foundation learners, the difficulty in generating ideas could be due to limited background knowledge of the topic and thus it affects them to produce good arguments when writing their argumentative essay.

The other difficulty faced by these ESL foundation learners in online writing argumentative essay is the nature of the online distance learning (ODL) itself. Since the participants are involved in ODL, the argumentative essay assigned to them has to be completed online in the comfort of their home. Djalilova (2020) mentioned that during ODL, some learners are most likely to encounter unforeseen circumstances that might affect the productivity of the task assigned to them. As responded by two of the respondents during the interview, they were affected and distracted by their surroundings and thus time allocated for them to complete the online argumentative essay is considered insufficient. These respondents had to undergo some situational problems, especially with small siblings (as elaborated by **Respondent E**) and thus it made them feel less motivated and productive when writing the argumentative essay online. Allen and Seaman (2010) stated that in order for learners to survive and succeed in ODL, strong motivation and strict self-discipline are crucial. Hence, situational problems in online learning are one of the contributing factors that can lead to writing difficulty in this current era and further influence their motivation in writing.

When it comes to strategies employed to overcome difficulties faced by these ESL foundation learners in online writing argumentative essays, strategies employed by most of the participants of this study are mainly related to how they generate ideas to write the essay assigned to them. The majority of them stated that they use a brainstorming strategy before

they begin to write in order to generate ideas to write. This finding has somehow confirmed a statement made by Nasution et. al. (2020) that brainstorming activity do help language learners to generate ideas that in return help them to write better. Numerous past studies conducted on the advantages of brainstorming activity revealed that this strategy has a positive effect on ESL learners' writing. Based on the explanation by *Respondent B*, SAKURA's writing technique is considered one of the ways to help learners get ready to write their essay since learners need to understand the essay's instruction, the topic itself, and finally the main elements in writing an essay. When learners understand these three requirements, it will help learners to write better essays. This is supported by Abdul Karim et. al. (2016) where a proper technique that learners employ and frequent exposure to the pre-writing stage have significant improvement in ESL learners' writing output and thus making them more active and ready for writing lessons.

The finding of this recent study also discovered that these ESL foundation learners were unconsciously involved in the pre-writing stage where they applied various ways to generate ideas such as the use of WH-Questions, searching for relevant quotes that are related to the topic, and recalling background schemata to write the online writing argumentative essay assigned to them. This finding is supported by Nasution et. al. (2020) that the brainstorming process during the writing of the pre-writing stage helps to prepare learners to write better. This is because learners are required to read, discuss, and brainstorm their ideas before they begin to write. It is also believed that with the advancement of technology and when learners are assigned to write the essay online, it acts as a tool that can motivate ESL foundation learners to write since information can be found at the tips of their fingers. This is also agreed by *Respondent E* since it is believed that during the brainstorming session, she would search for related quotes are searched online before she started writing. Hence, both the pre-writing stage and the use of technology can be considered as a great combo to overcome difficulties in writing.

6. CONCLUSION

It can be underlined that one of the obstacles faced by ESL foundation learners in online writing argumentative essays is to generate ideas to write in their essays and it is agreed by most of the ESL foundation learners that brainstorming is one of the strategies that can help them to overcome the difficulty to generate ideas to write essays. This study also confirmed the importance of ESL educators in teaching the process of writing especially during the pre-writing stage where learners get to brainstorm their ideas before beginning to write. It can be stated that learners do know the importance of the pre-writing stage although they are not aware and are being exposed to the process approach of writing. According to Hashempour et. al (2015), as cited in Owen (2019), when learners are aware of the pre-writing stage, it will increase their motivation and confidence to write since they have ideas of what to write in their essays. This not only helps to overcome the difficulty in writing but most importantly helps ESL learners to become more confident and motivated to write. Other than that, it is crucial for learners to practice self-discipline during ODL since it can affect learners' performance in writing. Faliza Mahamed Ali et al. (2022) suggested that in order to enhance students' ability to control distractions and plan for self-directed online learning, lecturers may need to improve their learning materials before students can direct themselves toward taking complete control of their learning. It is also suggested that further research use more respondents and also include qualitative data in order to confirm the findings of this recent study. Future studies may also consider exploring other strategies employed by ESL foundation learners to overcome difficulties in writing faced by them considering the fact that the current era has more strategies that can be applied such as using the ChatGPT and other tools.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

NHL wrote the introduction section, collected and refined the data performed the data analysis, and further wrote the findings and discussion sections. NSAK wrote the literature reviews, collected data and wrote the findings sections. MR contributed to preparing the methodology, the conclusion, and the reference sections. All authors are responsible for reading and approving the final manuscripts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

“None declared”

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