



Analyzing Students' Difficulties in Learning to Write

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Abstract

The study aims to identify the students' perception of learning writing in the literature college. The method applied in the study was quantitative. The number of participants recruited purposively was 40 students. The findings indicated that, despite being considered necessary, most of the students perceived that writing belongs to the most challenging subject. The participants also perceived that learning from the newspaper could provide the most current news to the participants. Lastly, in terms of writing sources, they still considered that the learning sources provided by the teachers were essential for them. However, they also expected that they could learn from other sites, such as social media, as this media could provide them with the most current sources in writing and more flexible and exciting sources.

Keywords:

English, learning to write, writing difficulties

INTRODUCTION

Writing is gaining importance in language teaching. It is due to the consideration that most people will tend to communicate more through written means than oral forms in the future (Klimova, 2014). Furthermore, people are communicating with a larger audience due to the emergence of various platforms, such as social media, the internet, and other online communication devices (See, for example, Belal, 2014). Based on the above

argument, writing can be categorized as a skill that belongs to an essential means of communication in today's world (Olshtain, 2001).

Additionally, Richards and Renandya (2002) stated that writing is the most complex skill students have to acquire. It requires the students to notice various aspects of their writing skills. For instance, the difficulties in learning to write may not only come from generating and organizing ideas but also from interpreting these ideas into readable texts (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 303). Even for English college students who are regularly assigned numerous English learning resources/practices learning to write constitutes serious tasks to be completed. In sum, when learning to write, students will be faced with many aspects, such as vocabulary, grammar mastery, spelling, readiness, and sufficient exposure to books and relevant reading materials (Moses & Mohamad, 2019).

Some studies have been done on this skill. However, these studies are primarily on specific types of writing. The study conducted by Lestari (2020), for instance, tends to focus on thesis writing. Her study focuses explicitly on the students' problems in writing the thesis. Pardede (2015) examined the difficulties encountered by English trainee teachers in writing research proposals. Writing is not intended only for academic purposes but also on other objectives, such as learning sources, aspects related to writing mastery, and many more. Besides, the student's difficulties with writing are also significant, as the problem may lead to the students' inhibition toward learning to write. Lastly, the sources used in learning to write are also important, as most students tend to depend on the learning sources as supporting media. Just like reading practice, learning to write will also entail some relevant sources, which may drive the students to write effectively; therefore, the learning sources in writing are essential and considered inseparable in supporting the effective learning process.

In sum, analyzing the students' writing should focus not only to the students' thesis as the application of the writing will be diverse. Scholars believe that writing skill is important for some reasons. Lee and Schmidgall (2020, p. 1) for instance, confirm that the ability to write effectively is an important workplace skill across professions and business sectors. Academically, writing skill is important as it can support the learners' academic success (Suarsa, 2020, p. 432). Therefore, the success of writing skill is not only important for the students' learning process but also for their future life. The need to analyze the student's writing skill covering more common aspects will help improve those who teach writing to identify potential hindrances in teaching this delicate skill to the students.

The present study aims to identify the most crucial skill ranging from students' perceptions, their difficulties, and the most suitable sources, which are essential to support their writing activities. The research questions are formulated as the followings:

1. What are the students' perceptions of writing skills?
2. What are the students' difficulties in learning to write?
3. What are the most suitable sources to learn to write in college?

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is inevitably true that writing is one of the most critical skills in language learning. Reid (1993) suggests that with the significantly increasing importance of textbook writing, conference presentations, and published research and commentary about L2 writing, the inclusion of written English tests has been a sign of the recognition of the importance of L2 writing (p. 29). Specifically, Harmer (1998) suggests that writing skill has finally been

recognized as one of the essential skills for language learning. He further emphasizes several aspects of writing learning, such as reinforcement, language development, learning style, and, most importantly, writing as a skill in its own right (Harmer, 1998, p. 79).

Besides being considered an important skill, writing is also considered one of the most challenging skills to learn. Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 303) reiterate that writing is the most complicated of the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). They believe the difficulty is generating and organizing ideas and translating the concept into a readable text (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 303). Kern (2000, as cited in Klimova, 2014, p. 3) exemplifies that someone who knows how to write a "summary" or "analysis" in a specific language does not guarantee that someone can do the same thing in the other language. Cognitively, writing is perceived as complex, mainly when it deals with acquiring academic vocabulary and style of discourse. Based on cognitive theory, written communication is an active process of skill development, and gradual elimination of errors as the learner internalizes the language (Klimova, 2014, p. 435). Ghaith (2002, as cited in Sugiarti, 2012, p. 2) defines "Writing as a complex process that allows writers to explore thoughts and ideas and make them visible and concrete."

Unlike the previous scholars, Widdowson (1978, p. 57) explained that the critical role of writing skills is naturally productive. His concept of practical skill means that writing skills can produce numerous or even uncountable productions of ideas, words, or utterances. On the other hand, a reading or listening skill will only receive the terms without producing them, thus being considered receptive skills. Olshtain (2001, p. 207) believes that writing enjoys special status as this skill allows a person to communicate various messages to close or distant, known or unknown readers. This type of communication is essential and can be applied in the traditional or modern world.

The purpose of writing

Some purposes might have been the main trigger for writing. Cox (as cited in Nawawi, 2011, p. 7) categorizes some of the goals of writing done by people. 1) To inform. The purpose of writing is generally to inform the public about anything important. 2) To amuse. Sometimes, the purpose of writing is to make people or readers feel amused or amazed. 3) To satirize. The purpose of writing can be to criticize; thus, the words/expression should be fun but seriously touching the matters. 4) To persuade. Finally, the purpose of writing can be to persuade or influence readers or people to do a certain thing.

Kinds of writing

According to Brown (2001, p. 220), there are four types of writing: 1) Imitative. Imitative is another term for writing down words or sentences to learn orthographic conventions. In this step, the students will have to acquire the essential skill of writing: writing words, punctuation, and very brief sentences. At this stage, form is the primary exclusive focus, while context and meaning are of secondary concern. 2) Intensive (controlled). This kind of writing is a skill in producing appropriate vocabulary within a context, collocation and idioms, and correct grammatical features up to the length of a sentence. 3) Responsive. This kind of writing requires the learners to perform at a limited discourse level, connecting sentences into a paragraph and creating a logically connected sequence of two or three sections. 4) Extensive. Extensive writing implies successful management of all

the processes and strategies of writing for all purposes, up to the length of a plain term paper, a significant research project report, or even a thesis.

Problems in writing

According to some scholars, there are some potential issues that students are learning to write may encounter. Some of the following are elaborated on below: 1) Lexical aspects. Alisha, Safitri, and Santoso (2019) identified that the main reasons for the student's difficulties in learning to write are vocabulary and grammatical mastery. They have a problem generating ideas because their vocabulary mastery needs to be improved, and they are unsure how to share their thoughts. They also need help in choosing the word, and they need to look it up in their dictionaries when writing in English. In addition, the problem in grammar has also led to difficulties in constructing a sentence. For instance, the students were identified as having problems using "past verb." 2) Non-lexical aspects. Besides lexical aspects, Fitria (2022) also identified that some problems students encounter when learning to write are both linguistic and verbal. For instance, she recognized that students assigned to write thesis projects usually had typical non-lexical problems, such as feeling bored, doubting themselves, having health-related issues, feeling worried or afraid of facing the examination, and many more.

Process writing

Freedman et al. (1978, as cited in Seow, 2002, p. 316) coin the term "process writing" to describe a more complex attempt at the writing process. In contrast to the writing process, which is more commonly perceived as the activity of producing a piece of writing and consists of widely adopted stages such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing, process writing refers to the attempt to construct process-oriented writing instruction affecting students' writing performance. It is packaged in more stages (See, Seow, 2002). Seow (2002, p. 317) suggests that process writing involves more complex steps, such as planning, drafting, responding, revising, editing, evaluating, and post-writing.

METHOD

The research method used in the present study was quantitative. Thus, it focuses more on the quantified responses indicated by the participants (McLeod, 2019, July 30). Besides, quantification means that the present study focuses on the number of responses. In sum, quantification means finding the data based on the most significant sum of reactions from the participants as the most important findings (see, e.g., Babbie, 2010). More specifically, the method conducted in the present study was survey research. Frankel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) elaborate that when the researchers are interested in taking certain opinions on a large group of people on a particular topic or an issue. They can use survey research. For instance, they can ask several questions relevant to the above matters. Further, the responses identified are coded into standardized categories and analyzed to highlight the description of their opinions (p. 393).

Types and Sources of data

The data sources taken in the present study were the students' perceptions. Unlike the data carried out in qualitative research, the origins and the research data taken are

quantified measures indicating the students' responses on particular aspects (e.g., perceptions toward writing, difficulties, etc.). Specifically, as shown in the written questionnaires, the students' perceptions toward learning to write were treated as research data (Frankel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

Instruments

The instruments administered were in the form of written questionnaires. The questionnaires were arranged carefully based on their relevance to the research questions formulated in the present study. The questionnaire is divided three main parts: 1) Students' perceptions toward writing, 2) Students' perceptions toward the difficulties in learning writing, and 3) Students' perceptions toward the preferred media. The three core issues, such as students' perception is important as it can provide more objective basis on teaching writing.

Besides, the students' difficulties, which the students generally encounter when learning writing, are also offered as introspective statements allowing the students to express their perceptions briefly and succinctly. Lastly, the use of the media when learning writing allows the students to figure out the potentially most suitable device, which can be used to learn writing in academic context. Specifically, the options are tabulated from the statements: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The use of questionnaire, despite being limited in eliciting the participants' responses, substantially allows the participants to express their opinion on certain aspects in more convenient manner (Yu, 2010). Please refer to appendix

Data collection procedure

Prior to the data elicitation, the students were briefed in several aspects of the study. The students, who were recruited as the participants were those who attended the literature class and were considered active students, particularly in taking writing class. The data collection was conducted to the students who have been given a briefing pertaining to the study conducted by researcher. The data collection was conducted in one day. The students filled in the written questionnaires after the briefing. The students were not allowed to discuss the items in the questionnaire and were only given time to fill in the statements. The written questionnaires were offered on their own tables so that the students did not need to discuss or ask to their classmates. The students were instructed to leave the room after completing their questionnaires.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' perception toward learning to write in college

As shown in Table 1, despite perceiving the critical role of writing, the students tend to believe that Writing is more complex than the other skills (i.e., reading, listening, and speaking). The further fact indicates that the students consistently answer the two opposing statements. Specifically, the statement offered, 'Writing is easier than other skills,' tends to be responded to negatively, thus indicating the students' rejection of the above statement. Likewise, the statement 'Writing is more complex than the other subjects' tend to be responded to positively, thus indicating the students' conviction toward the nature of writing skill, which is commonly more complex than the other skills/subjects. In sum, the above findings are powerfully relevant to the arguments offered by some scholars indicating the complexities of Writing. Raimes (2002, p. 303),

for instance, confirms that Writing belongs to the most challenging skill that L2 learners have to overcome. The complexity of Writing is not only caused by generating and organizing ideas but also by translating ideas into readable text. Other scholars, such as Xin (2007 as cited in Muamaroh et al. 2020), confirm that Writing is perceived as the most challenging skill in language learning.

Table 1:
Students' perception toward learning to write in college

No	Students' perceptions toward writing	Options (N = 40)			
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Writing is not important for my work	15 (37.5 %)	12 (30 %)	7 (17.5 %)	6 (15 %)
2.	Writing is important for my future	3 (7.5 %)	5 (12.5 %)	18 (45 %)	14 (35 %)
3.	Writing is important for my career	2 (5 %)	3 (7.5 %)	15 (37.5 %)	20 (50 %)
4.	Writing is important for my future academic journey	3 (7.5 %)	2 (5 %)	17 (42.5 %)	18 (45 %)
5.	Writing is more difficult than the other skill (i.e. listening, speaking, and reading)	2 (5 %)	3 (7.5 %)	12 (30 %)	23 (57.5 %)
6.	Writing is easier than the other English skills (i.e. listening, speaking, and reading)	15 (37.5 %)	12 (30 %)	7 (17.5 %)	6 (15 %)

Students' perception toward difficulties to learn writing

Table 2 indicates that the students tend to have the same perception toward the critical role of vocabulary in learning to write. Besides, they also tended to admit that practicing writing is a complicated learning process.

Table 2:
Students' perceptions toward difficulties to learn writing

No	Students' perception toward the difficulties in learning writing	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	The most difficult thing in learning to write is grammar.	6 (15 %)	7 (17.5 %)	12 (30 %)	15 (37.5 %)
2.	The most difficult thing in learning to write is vocabulary.	3 (7.5 %)	5 (12.5 %)	13 (32.50)	19 (47.5 %)
3.	The most difficult thing in learning to write is practice.	2 (5 %)	3 (7.5 %)	15 (37.5 %)	20 (50 %)
4.	The most difficult thing in learning to write is to get idea.	3 (7.5 %)	2 (5 %)	17 (42.5%)	18 (45 %)
5.	The most difficult thing in learning to write is to write long passage.	7 (17.5 %)	6 (15 %)	15 (37.5 %)	12 (30 %)

Further study should be conducted so that the student's difficulty in writing, particularly concerning their writing practice, can be specifically identified. It is the case as many aspects are closely connected to writing practice. Muamaroh et al. (2020) identify some stages commonly experienced by students in learning to write, such as planning, drafting, editing, and final revision. Despite completing the above stages, the students still needed help with the content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanic.

They also showed that the most substantial factors inhibiting their English writing were their mastery of grammar and vocabulary, lack of practice, and self-confidence to write in English. In sum, the present study is relevant to what Muamaroh et al. (2020) have found that vocabulary belongs to the most important and inseparable aspect, which aggravates the complexities of writing.

Students’ perception toward the most preferred media to learn writing

Table 3 depicts that social media is the most preferred media by students. Of the 40 students participating in the study, 35 students were found to indicate their preference for social media. This study is also relevant to the other findings indicating the increasingly important role of social media. For instance, Tomas and Dulin’s research (2021) indicated that students frequently exposed to social media have better-written output, particularly in their grammar and writing mechanics. Likewise, Dewi, Fauzan, and Nadia (2022) proved that students’ responses indicated that they felt comfortable when learning English on social media, especially in writing.

Table 3:
The students’ perceptions toward the most preferred media to learn writing

No.	Students’ perception toward the most preferred learning media to learn writing.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	Book or module is the most preferred learning source for me.	15 (37.5%)	12 (30 %)	7 (17.5 %)	6 (15 %)
2.	News-paper article is the most preferred learning source for me.	3 (7.5 %)	5 (12.5 %)	18 (45 %)	14 (35 %)
3.	Things available in social media are the most preferred learning source for me.	2 (5 %)	3 (7.5 %)	15 (37.5 %)	20 (50 %)
4.	Internet or things in the web are the most preferred learning sources for me.	3 (7.5 %)	2 (5 %)	17 (42.5%)	18 (45 %)
5	The teacher’s explanation or teaching material provided to students is the most preferred material in learning writing.	5 (12.5%)	8 (20 %)	15 (37.5 %)	12 (30 %)

The flexibility of social media can be used for various purposes. Besides that, social media also provides social interaction, which is considered to reduce student anxiety because of the pleasant experiences provided by social media. As a result, students become more confident in learning and practicing their English language skills anywhere and anytime. The above findings indicate that the students prefer something different in learning writing. Most of the written sources in the books need to be updated, thus making the topic less enjoyable to the students. Given the dynamic changes and information around the world, the students are supposed to have more relevant topics to keep in touch with the latest news, trends, or topics and be more invigorated in learning to write.

Further study should also be conducted on the relationship between the students’ activities on social media and their preference in choosing social media to learn to write. Concerning the term ‘media,’ Brinton (2001, as cited in Alamsyah, Darmawan, & Santosa, 2019), defines it as anything the teacher uses to facilitate the learning process.

The efficacy of language-teaching media has been viral (Handayani, 2020). Until recently, social media has also gained attraction as one of the most effective learning media. Handayani's finding (2020) indicated that of the 50 students learning in the English education department at Muria University, Kudus, 94 % preferred to access youtube to learn English. This finding indicated that the role of social media in learning English would be more critical as they are getting more attractive compared with the rigid and ordinary materials in traditional media (e.g., textbooks or video programs).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

Given the subject's difficulties, the students should have more guidance from their lecturers. Besides, it can also be interpreted that the students need to have a variety of learning materials to allow them to practice. Practicing solely from books or other ordinary media will deter the students as the book usually contains a very formal topic and is less current. The teachers/lecturers should be willing to identify the topics that are very interesting and relevant to the student's background so that the students can consider the learning materials based on their relevance and novelty or interest.

It is undoubtedly essential to keep the students' interest by providing the latest or interesting materials so that the students will be more motivated to write. The role of social media, continuously providing lots of exciting and current information in English, can be used as an alternative to learning English to prevent students' boredom. Up to now, studies indicate that boredom can be one of the potential factors affecting the students' writing learning process (See, e.g., Kruk, Pawlak, & Zawodniak, 2021).

The present study was conducted quantitatively, thus limiting the researcher in eliciting more detailed data. Further study should also entail interviews with the participants so that their oral responses can provide more detailed and varied findings. Secondly, the participants recruited in the study were also limited, further study might entail more participants coming from various language colleges so that the views elicited will be more reliable.

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