

# Ideational Matters in Essay Writing: EFL Undergraduates' Perspectives

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**Abstract.** At higher educational levels, students/ learners experienced some difficulties in developing good writing. In expanding English writing academically, it is essential to analyze students' writing development in several matters. This study aimed to ascertain difficulties in writing an essay on the students'/learners' perspectives, particularly on ideational problems, and their expressions on that issue. By conducting a quantitative case study research design, this study engaged 37 third-year students at a private university in Jakarta who joined an academic writing course. In collecting the data, this study assigned a set of questionnaires and a Cause-and-Effect essay writing as the instruments. Based on the collated data and analysis, this study revealed six issues on ideational matters encountered by the students/learners in common, and each had different expressions of difficulties. Among the 37 writings, this study deeply narrated two remarkable essays with their statements. Hence, further research is needed to achieve an in-depth and comprehensive result.

**Key words:** ideational matters, essay writing, EFL undergraduates' perspectives.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dealing with English writing for students of non-native English-speaking countries has been a substantial need, including in Indonesia. Not only in high school levels but also in higher levels of education, even in an English major where the students are required to construe good writing in an academic construction (Alharbi, 2019). In an academic structure, some aspects are considered crucial issues in linking syntax and ideas (Meyer, 2015). Students need to learn how several patterns, systems, and relations help them to build adequate ideas for writing development (Martin & Rose, 2007), as well as several strategies for organizing their ideas into cohesion and coherence (Lee, 2021). All the matters would divinely bring meaningful experiences to the students/learners.

In developing English writing, it is essential to analyze students' writing development by recognizing the features of their writing, starting with the writing features (Crossley, 2020; Mahadini et al., 2021) according to particular genre knowledge (Xu & Li, 2018) to appropriate writing style (Arsyad et al., 2021). It includes the understanding of lexical bundle instructions (Birhan, 2021) or possible self-regulated step-by-step instructions (Kuzmenkova & Erykina, 2022). When the students/learners overcome the writing knowledge of process, system, content, and genre, they will be able to produce enlightened writings (Rofiqoh et al., 2022).

Diverse research has been conducted to enhance students/learners' producing good writing, from early writing development with particular instructions and interventions (Harmey & Wilkinson, 2019) to sophisticated levels of fluency and accuracy development (Afshari et al., 2020). Previous research also revealed how specific topics followed by peer's and instructor's feedback led to students' writing achievements (Çelik, 2020; Pourdana & Tavassoli, 2022; Saeli & Cheng, 2021; Shi et al., 2019). Moreover, different approaches of individuals and collaboratives were investigated and demonstrated that collaborative writing increased the students'/learners fluency and accuracy in developing their ideas (Sarkhosh & Najafi, 2020). Students'/learners' critical thinking in developing ideas was also increased by adopting a process genre-based approach (Hanusova et al., 2020).

However, all the previous studies have not exhibited specific ideational matters in the EFL undergraduates' writing, particularly in essay writing. Since the ideational problems are prominent in generating the entire ideas of the EFL undergraduates' essays, this study was carried out to answer the following questions:

What ideational matters were encountered by the EFL undergraduates in their essay writing?

How did the EFL undergraduates perceive all the ideational matters in building the essay?

## METHODS

This study applied a quantitative case study design with descriptive analysis and purposive sampling (Woodside, 2010). Enrolled by 37 third-year EFL undergraduates in Academic Writing Course in the English Education Program of a private university in Jakarta, the participants should complete a set of questionnaires and an essay writing assignment as the instruments of the study. The questionnaire consisted of eight numbers comprised in two sections; first section included six numbers of closed-ended questions with scaled scores: 1 = very hard, 2 = hard, 3 = neutral, 4 = easy, and 5 = very easy. Meanwhile, the other section included two numbers of open-ended questions that the participants should answer concisely. The students' needs analysis, and theories on ideation and essay characteristics (Martin & Rose, 2007; Oshima & Hogue, 2007) were underlying the questionnaire.

Besides the questionnaire, the study assigned an essay writing task of a Cause and Effect essay genre. With a proportional score, the assignment covered five components of essay writing modified from the participants' handbook: thesis statement, organization, ideas development,

clarity, and style (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). A table and figures with sufficient descriptions displayed the results based on the collated data. Because of limited time, among 37 participants, only two remarkable participants were selected to be more deeply narrated. In this way, the results would adequately answer the research questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collections showed that the ideational matters covered six issues: deciding topics, stating a thesis statement, referring to relevant sources, organizing ideas, developing ideas, and organizing coherence. Those issues answer the first research question. Each matter had different expressions from the EFL undergraduates. Organizing coherence had the utmost concern from the participants, which was considered the 'hard' matter, followed by developing ideas, organizing ideas, and stating a thesis statement. Most participants expressed 'neutral' for referring to relevant sources, continuing in deciding topics, and presenting a thesis statement. Table 1 reveals the complete results.

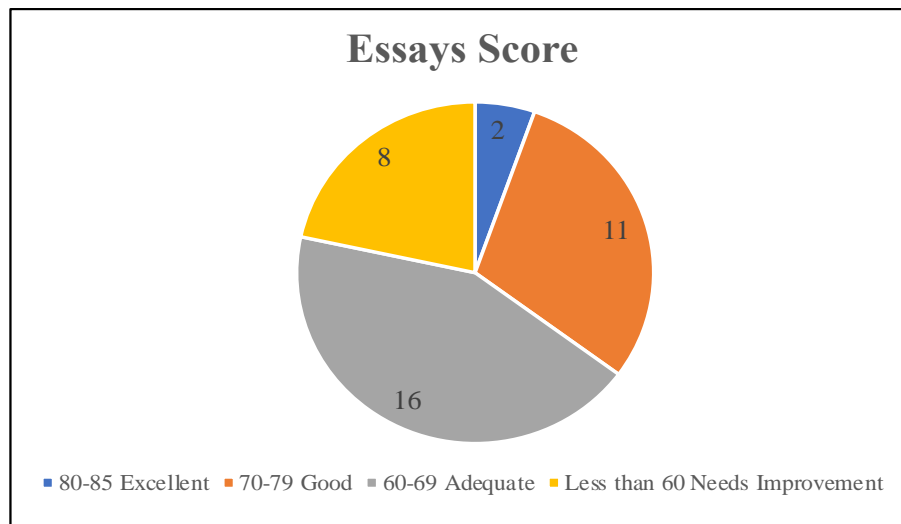
**Table 1.** Responses on Questionnaire

Descriptions	Scale				
	Very Hard	Hard	Neutral	Easy	Very Easy
Deciding Topics	2	8	19	7	1
Stating a Thesis Statement	3	19	14	1	0
Referring Relevant Sources	1	5	24	6	1
Organizing Ideas	2	19	13	2	1
Developing Ideas	4	20	11	2	0
Organizing Coherence	7	22	8	0	0

Those expressions in table 1 also answered the second question of the research where the participants showed the great barrier of their essays' writing on organizing coherence. Indeed, the six issues of the ideational matters indicated that different participants had distinctive difficulties in developing their ideas in English writing (Ferris & Eckstein, 2020). This result is in line with previous research that revealed most students of higher educational levels perceived difficulties in generating ideas and constructing good writing (Ratnawati et al., 2018). Most students admitted the lack of constructive

writing procedures that lecturers should deliver (Abba et al., 2018).

However, other instruments of essay writing assignments demonstrated quite good results. The results show 2 participants with "excellent" results, 11 respondents with "good" results, 16 with "adequate" results, and eight participants with "needs improvement". Figure 1 displays detailed information on the results. The writing score exhibited the implementation of the participants' understanding and confirmed their responses to the questionnaire. Figure 1 displays detailed information on the results.



**Figure 1.** Essays' Writing Score

Among 37 participants, more than half of the participants generated adequate writing composition to excellent composition. Two remarkable participants with "excellent" scores were selected to investigate. The first participant expressed that stating a thesis statement and organizing coherence in her essay writing was very hard. The participant admitted that she needed to read a lot and practice more. Surprisingly, she did not reflect on her difficulties in her essay writing. She developed her essay academically and got the highest score for her essay.

Another participant with an "excellent" score also declared that she had a "hard" experience in

developing her essay, both in stating the thesis statement and organizing the coherence. The participant divulged the necessity of reading good essay examples to broaden her writing knowledge and ideas development. Impressively, the participant also got an excellent score and success in developing ideas academically. The following figures 2 and 3 display the results of the two participants. Each figure shows introductory paragraphs of their essay where they put the thesis statement clearly. They then developed the whole passages with the main idea and supporting ideas that tailed them all coherently.

### English Speaking Learning in Indonesian Elementary School

Each country has a communication medium that can be used to establish a personal bond. Language is the term for several types of exchanges. Language is extremely important in our daily lives since it allows us to communicate our thoughts to others. English is became the international language. In Indonesia itself, English is a major foreign language that is taught in schools. Indonesian students begin learning English at a early age, such as in elementary school. English language competence is one of the abilities that a protege must master from the beginning. Then there are certain barriers to learning English for primary kids, as well as the impact on students learning English.

**Figure 2.** Introductory Paragraph of "Excellent" Participant #1

### Reading Skills of Elementary School Students

English is an international language. Not a few countries that make English as the main language. But countries that make English as a second language are also no less numerous, including Indonesia which includes English lessons in every unit of education level. Many professions make English as its criteria, therefore it is important to learn English early. In English there are 4 skills that are important to master, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. On this occasion, **the author will discuss one of these skills, namely, reading skills, especially in elementary school students.**

**Figure 3.** Introductory Paragraph of "Excellent" Participant #2

Based on the selected participants' essay writings and the expressions of their difficulties, this study found that the participants realized to improve their knowledge by reading a lot and practicing writing more by themselves. Flexible and sufficient time is needed to be allocated. Those activities with self-regulated strategies and automated evaluation are suitable for their condition and suggested to increase their critical thinking and proficiency in writing (Palermo & Wilson, 2020; Umamah & Cahyono, 2020). Due to the disrupted era, enhancing and enriching students/learners' critical thinking at the higher education level through digital multimodal consider to be very crucial (Lailiyah & Wediyantoro, 2021; Rosyada, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

At the higher educational level in non-native English speaker countries, students/learners experienced some ideational difficulties in developing academic writing, including deciding topics, stating a thesis statement, referring to relevant sources, organizing ideas, developing ideas, and organizing coherence. This quantitative case study with descriptive analysis revealed that students/learners needed to be enriched by diverse writing knowledge and various writing processes/strategies. In this way, the use of multimodal in writing was very crucial. By utilizing multimodal for writing, students/learners are encouraged to enhance their critical thinking and proficiency in writing.

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