

First Year Students' View Point: Encountering Problems In Writing English In Academic Level

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the problems encountered by first-year university students in writing English at the academic level, focusing on their own view point. Seven participants contributed their writing which elaborated the problems in writing English served as the primary data source. A descriptive analytical method was employed to examine the texts, with the aim of identifying recurring patterns that reflected common writing difficulties. The analysis process involved detecting prominent "problems" in the participants' writing, followed by interpretation and conceptualization to reveal underlying themes and derive meaning from the data. The findings revealed six major categories of writing problems frequently experienced by the participants: grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, weak writing structure or organization, unfamiliarity with academic writing style, spelling issues, and the incorrect use of punctuation. These problems appeared consistently across the data, highlighting areas in which the participants struggled to meet the expectations of English writing. Such difficulties not only affect the coherence and clarity of their writing but may also influence their confidence and motivation to write. Therefore, supportive instruction, practical exercises, and personalized feedback are essential to help first-year students overcome these hurdles and develop the competence needed for effective writing communication in English.

Keywords: writing problems, writing English, academic level, first-year students

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyelidiki masalah yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa tahun pertama dalam menulis Bahasa Inggris di tingkat akademis, dengan fokus pada sudut pandang mahasiswa. Tujuh partisipan berkontribusi dengan mengelaborasi tulisan mereka terkait masalah dalam menulis Bahasa Inggris sebagai sumber data utama. Metode analisis deskriptif digunakan untuk memeriksa teks, dengan tujuan mengidentifikasi pola berulang yang merefleksikan kesulitan menulis yang umum. Proses analisis melibatkan pendeteksian "masalah" yang menonjol dalam tulisan partisipan, kemudian diinterpretasi dan dikonseptualisasi untuk mengungkap tema yang mendasarinya dan memperoleh makna dari data. Temuan mengungkapkan enam kategori utama masalah penulisan yang sering dialami oleh partisipan: kesalahan tata bahasa, kosakata terbatas, struktur atau organisasi penulisan yang lemah, ketidakakraban dengan gaya penulisan akademis, masalah ejaan, dan penggunaan tanda baca yang salah. Masalah-masalah ini muncul secara konsisten di seluruh data, menyoroti area di mana partisipan berjuang untuk memenuhi ekspektasi penulisan dalam Bahasa Inggris. Kesulitan tersebut tidak hanya mempengaruhi koherensi dan kejelasan tulisan mereka tetapi juga dapat mempengaruhi kepercayaan diri dan motivasi mereka untuk menulis. Oleh karena itu, instruksi yang mendukung, latihan praktis, dan personal umpan balik sangat penting untuk membantu mahasiswa tahun pertama mengatasi rintangan ini dan mengembangkan kompetensi yang dibutuhkan untuk berkomunikasi lewat menulis yang efektif dalam Bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: masalah menulis, menulis Bahasa Inggris, level akademik, mahasiswa tahun pertama

A. Introduction

Writing is essential for written communication particularly in English language learning. Additionally, Taye and Mengesha (2024) also wrote the same opinion that writing skills are essential in academic and professional settings and are the cornerstone for effective communication and critical thinking. Being able in writing English will make students easier in building a coherent English paragraph or text. However, unlikely other skills in English, writing is still considered difficult by most students (Rahmawati, 2022; Rao, 2019; Siregar et al., 2023; Suyanto, n.d.). In addition, Demneri (2024) also strengthened by stating that writing is considered by students as the most demanding competence out of the four main language competences: reading, speaking, listening, and writing.

The problems in writing English not only found in junior and high school level, but also in higher level education. University students particularly English study program will receive the four courses of English skills plus the structure/written or grammar skill. Many studies have studied the difficulties, problems, obstacles, challenges – any similar term – relating with writing in English.

For the first year university students, the challenge is particularly significant as they having a transition from school environment to a more academic setting as university students where effective written communication is definitely crucial and essential. Many of them still struggle with various aspects of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and coherence. Study done by Siregar et al. (2023) mentioned that problems that often arise in writing include grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, thought patterns, and so on as well as students' motivation to write content and help planning the writing structure. These problems often stem from limited exposure to authentic English writing, insufficient practice, and a lack of confidence in their language skills.

One of the most common problems faced by first year students when they engage in writing course during their first year is

grammar error. This is also stated clearly by Asnas and Hidayanti (2024) based on their study findings. They confirmed that the most frequent difficulties in academic writing posed by EFL college students were grammatical aspects. English grammar can be complex, with numerous rules governing tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and sentence formation. Non-native speakers often struggle with distinguishing between verb tenses, using articles correctly, and avoiding common mistakes such as run-on sentences and misplaced modifiers. As a result, their writing may lack clarity and precision, making it difficult to read and understand for the message they intending to convey through writing.

Another major issue is limited vocabulary. Many students rely on basic words and phrases, making their writing repetitive and less engaging. Without a strong vocabulary, they struggle to express complex ideas or vary their sentence structure effectively. The lack of exposure to diverse reading materials further hinders their ability to develop richer vocabulary. This limitation often results in using common, vague, or simple writing that does not meet the expectations of academic purposes or goals set by the lecture for the writing subject.

Apart from grammar and vocabulary, sentence structure and coherence are also significant challenges. Some students write sentences that are either too long and confusing or too short and fragmented. This typical short-long sentences also was addressed by Case (2024) as part of problems in writing English among fifteen number listed. Along with that, they may also struggle with organizing ideas logically which can cause problem in joining the whole paragraphs within one complete text. This can lead to lack of flow of information. Without proper guidance on structuring their thoughts, their writing may appear unorganized or difficult to follow.

Moreover, lack of confidence plays a crucial role in students' writing difficulties. Cited from Maharani, Hakiki, and Safitri (2023) that lack of personal problem became one of the root problems of the writing process and product; meanwhile the personal problem takes responsibility for student

confidence in writing. Fear of making mistakes often discourages students from experimenting with different sentence constructions or vocabulary choices. This hesitancy may lead to repetitive writing styles and an over-reliance on simple sentence structures. Additionally, students may avoid writing altogether, which further limits their opportunities for improvement.

Addressing these problems requires suitable strategies that focus on improving problems in writing English such as grammar proficiency, expanding vocabulary, and enhancing writing structure. Encouraging students to read extensively, practice regularly, and obtain constructive feedback can significantly enhance their writing skills.

Therefore, this study is conducted to find out the students' view point concerning problems in writing English during their first year in university level. By understanding the problems students face in writing English, lecturers of writing courses may develop more effective teaching methods or media to help students become confident and competent in writing English.

B. Study Method

The method employed in this study was a qualitative descriptive study. This was suitable to identify and elaborate the problems felt by the first year students in writing English. The students were asked to write a simple essay which narrate the problems they faced in writing English as the main purpose of conducting this mini study.

The participant of this study was the first year students of an English Education Study Program in one private university in Medan. All of the students were fresh graduates which came from different background of senior high school. There were seven students in this class. Three students graduated from Islamic boarding school, while the other three graduated from senior high school, and only one student who was not a fresh graduate.

The data in this study were obtained during October 2024. The seven participants in this study were instructed to write their experience of writing English by elaborating the problems they faced and felt during the

writing of English for any kind of tasks/assignments or various texts writing test given. The students' writing were uploaded to the online drive as the technique for collecting data for this study. The analysis of the data involved identification and reporting of pattern from the data to identify the appearance of the so called "problems" in writing English by the participants. Then interpreted and conceptualized for the meaning of the data identified. The "problems" were identified under the terms of various aspects of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and coherence and other terms considered as "problems". Narrative description was used to display the elaboration of the analysis result.

C. Result and Discussion

Below elaboration display the summary from the participants' writing which mentioning the problems they face in writing English. There were seven participants in this study who uploaded their writing in the drive.

Student 1 (UK):

1. Grammar including errors in using tenses, problems with subject-verb agreement, errors in the use of articles (a, an, the), difficulty with prepositions, problems with irregular verbs.
2. Vocabulary including vocabulary limitations, use of words that are not in the correct context, difficulty finding the right synonym, repeating the same words too often.
3. Errors in using collocations (word combinations).
4. Writing structure such as difficulty creating coherent paragraphs, problems in organizing ideas, lack of transitions between paragraphs, difficulty making a clear thesis statement, weak conclusion writing.
5. Academic writing style including difficulty writing formal vs informal, problems in the use of academic language, errors in academic writing format, difficulty in citing sources (citations), problems with plagiarism.

Student 2 (SDW):

1. Writing words including spelling.
2. Confused about good and correct writing.
3. Punctuation such as comma, period, question mark.

Student 3 (SO):

1. Vocabulary (don't know enough vocabulary to express ideas, and use the wrong words).
2. Spelling (difficulty with spelling problems, especially difficult or unfamiliar words).
3. Punctuation (often misplaced).
4. The use of tenses, verbs, aggregates and sentence structure.

Student 4 (NNS):

1. Using correct tense or verb (often have to pause for a moment to think about whether using the correct tense or if the verb chosen matches the subject, even though understand most of the rules).
2. Struggle with the nuances of English vocabulary and expressions (so many synonyms and phrases that convey similar meanings and choosing the right one can be daunting).

Student 5 (AN):

1. Capital letters (should be small or should be big).

Student 6 (NPF):

1. Spell and write unknown words.
2. Layout or arrangement of writing such as writing for the formal writing.
3. Confused and difficult to compose a sentence properly and correctly.
4. Inappropriate use of commas, periods, question mark and other punctuation mark.
5. Errors in the use of tenses, subject – verb agreement, prepositions, and other sentence structures.
6. Errors in use of grammar.
7. Difficulties in managing time.
8. Problems in organizing ideas and writing thesis statements such as, writing topics.
9. Mistakes in word usage like selecting inappropriate words.

Student 7 (JFS):

1. Tenses.
2. Sentence, phrase, and clause.
3. Difficulty recognizing which are the main sentence and the subordinate sentences.
4. Elliptical sentence, Modal Auxiliary verb.
5. Pronunciation.
6. Slang words and phonetic.
7. Difficult of making a good sentence.
8. Punctuation, like semicolons, commas, exclamation marks, and periods.

Based on the data obtained from the participants' writing, the problems mentioned in their writing were categorized into several themes which cover the same intention as written by the participants. They were grammar, vocabulary, writing structure (organization), academic writing style, spelling, and punctuation. There were six themes which were interpreted and conceptualized. Among those themes, punctuation was the most mentioned problem by the participants and followed by grammar. Others were averagely mentioned by them.

1. Punctuation

Punctuation was mostly mentioned as the problem by the participants. It was themed under various problems such as the use of comma, period, question mark, semicolons, exclamation marks, capital letters, and other punctuation marks.

Many learners still struggle with the proper placement of punctuation marks including commas, periods, question marks, and others such as semicolons and exclamation marks. These marks, often misusing or omitting them, which leads to confusion or loss of meaning in the sentence structure. Punctuation became one recurring problem in English writing viewed by the participants.

Common issues which were described by the participants include:

1. misplaced punctuation, where commas or periods appear in the wrong place, disrupting the flow or clarity of ideas;
2. inconsistent capitalization, where capital letters are either used unnecessarily (e.g., in the middle of a sentence) or omitted when required (e.g., at the beginning of a sentence or for proper nouns);

3. overuse or underuse of punctuation marks, such as using too many exclamation marks or forgetting to use a question mark at the end of an interrogative sentence.

These errors indicate a need for greater attention to writing conventions and an understanding of how punctuation affects the tone and structure of English text.

2. Grammar

Grammar is the backbone of effective writing, and issues in this area can significantly hinder clarity and communication. Many students in different level of education struggle with a range of grammatical elements, which can collectively impact the accuracy, tone, and fluency of their writing.

From the view point of the study participants, the grammar problems mostly referred to the use of correct tenses and verbs. We know that there are different tenses with different use of verbs and the participants are believed to have understood the pattern of tenses and how to create sentence using the pattern. Unfortunately, some students still need to consider whether using the correct tenses or verbs which match with the subject or in accordance with the structure. This situation can cause confusion for students whom do not understand the grammar or structure in English writing.

Other than tenses with the verbs, grammar problems also including elliptical sentence, modal auxiliary verb, prepositions, articles, subject-verb agreement, irregular verbs, sentence structures, phrase, and clause.

A common area of difficulty is the correct use of tenses. Students often mix up past, present, and future forms, leading to confusion about when actions occur. They may understand the rules in theory but applying the rules in writing often causes hesitation. Closely related with tenses is the use of suitable verbs for the subjects can become challenges as in the rules for subject-verb agreement. For example, using "He go" instead of "He goes". These seemingly small errors can interrupt the grammatical flow of a sentence. In addition, trouble with articles (a, an, the) also mislead students since articles don't always exist in the students' native language (Bahasa Indonesia). Deciding when

to use "a" vs. "the," or whether an article is needed at all, can be confusing especially with abstract or uncountable nouns.

Another issue is preposition usage, which is notoriously difficult because there are few firm rules and many idiomatic expressions in English. A slight misstep such as writing "interested on" instead of "interested in" can alter meaning or make the sentence sound unnatural.

Beyond individual grammar elements, students often face broader issues with sentence construction. Many struggle to distinguish between phrases, clauses, and complete sentences. There's also confusion identifying main vs. subordinate clauses which are crucial for sentence variety and complexity.

Grammar challenges may also involve less common but important structures like elliptical sentences (where parts are implied rather than directly stated), and modal auxiliary verbs like should, could, might, and must, which require careful use to convey mood, possibility, necessity, or politeness.

Altogether, these difficulties reflect a deeper need for consistent grammar practice. A lot exercises will benefit students with variety of grammar instruction which can help them move from rule knowledge to confident and fluent application.

3. Vocabulary

Vocabulary problems including vocabulary limitations, use of words that are not in the correct context, difficulty finding the right synonym/phrases that convey similar meaning, repeating the same words too often, errors in using collocations (word combinations), use the wrong words (mistakes in word usage such as selecting inappropriate words), and use of slang words.

Vocabulary becomes the study participants' concern when writing English. They encountered challenges using various vocabularies which can significantly impact their ability to express ideas clearly and effectively.

One common issue is having a limited vocabulary which often means not knowing enough words to convey thoughts in a nuanced or sophisticated way. They

realized they did not own a lot of vocabularies which can enrich their sentence writing. This limitation can restrict their writing.

Another frequent difficulty is the misuse of words that is using terms that do not suitable the context or selecting unnatural or incorrect vocabularies. Mostly, students will rely on the same familiar words repeatedly which leading to redundancy and a lack of variety in expression.

Additionally, there were also problem with synonyms and subtle shades of meaning. Choosing between similar-sounding English words such as "say," "state," "declare," and "announce" which can be used in different context, tone, formality, or usage. This choosing can cause students to easily pick the wrong word without realizing it. On top of that, mastering idiomatic expressions and figurative language can be especially tricky.

Mistakes in word choice often stem not from a lack of effort, but from the overwhelming number of options and exceptions within the language.

4. Writing Structure (Writing Organization)

The problem encountered in writing structure such as difficulty creating coherent paragraphs, problems in organizing ideas, lack of transitions between paragraphs, difficulty making a clear thesis statement, weak conclusion writing, confused about good and correct writing, confused and difficult to compose a sentence properly and correctly, difficulty recognizing the main sentence and the subordinate sentences.

Struggling with writing structure or organization also was experienced by the study participants. They faced problem when attempting to produce well-structured and organized writing in English. These difficulties often begin with composing clear and coherent paragraphs which need considering writing related ideas together to create coherent paragraphs. They often struggle in the organization of ideas. They tend to find it difficult to sort their thoughts logically or to arrange them in a sequence that builds a strong argument or narrative. This can result in writing where ideas appear without a clear sense of direction or purpose.

Another significant issue is the lack of effective transitions between paragraphs. Transitions are vital in helping the reader understand how one idea connects to the next. Without them, even well-written paragraphs can feel isolated and disconnected.

Formulating a clear thesis statement also important in writing organization. Thesis statement serves as the foundation of any structured piece of writing. A weak or unclear thesis can undermine the entire composition, leaving readers unsure about the main purpose or argument.

In addition to paragraph-level issues, sentence construction presents its own set of challenges. Students may struggle with building grammatically correct sentences, distinguishing between phrases, clauses, and complete sentences, or identifying main vs. subordinate clauses. These confusions can lead to incorrect sentence building which can weaken the overall clarity and effectiveness of the writing.

Ultimately, all these issues point to a deeper confusion about what constitutes "good and correct writing." Without a solid understanding of writing conventions, learners may feel lost when trying to construct cohesive, logical, and grammatically sound compositions.

5. Spelling

Spelling problems may refer to the writing words correctly. The difficulty lies on writing difficult words or unfamiliar or unknown words which can lead to miss pronunciation of the English words.

Spelling is one of the foundational aspects of writing. It can be a persistent challenge for students, especially when they encounter unfamiliar or complex vocabulary. One key difficulty lies in writing words correctly, where even everyday words can be misspelled due to uncertainty with spelling rules, silent letters, or irregular patterns in English. Errors in spelling often disrupt the readability of writing and can distract readers from the intended message.

6. Academic Writing Style

In regards of academic writing style, the concern including difficulty writing formal vs. informal, problems in the use of

academic language, errors in academic writing format, difficulty in citing sources (citations), problems with plagiarism, and layout or arrangement of writing (formal writing vs. informal writing).

Academic writing demands a specific tone, structure, and discipline that often differs significantly from everyday communication. Many students of the first year in university find it challenging to meet these expectations due to a variety of stylistic and structural issues.

One major problem is the inability to differentiate between formal and informal language. Academic writing typically avoids contractions, personal opinions, and casual expressions. However, students often carry over habits from speech or informal writing into their academic texts, leading to a tone that is too daily conversational for academic writing standards.

Closely tied to this is the problematic use of academic language. Academic writing values clarity, precision, and a professional tone, often using technical or discipline-specific vocabulary. First year students may either avoid such vocabulary out of uncertainty or misuse it, which can compromise the credibility and coherence of their work.

Additionally, there are errors in academic writing format, such as not adhering to citation styles like APA, MLA, or Chicago. Mistakes in formatting references, using incorrect margins, or omitting essential elements like abstracts or headings signal a lack of familiarity with academic conventions.

One particularly serious issue is difficulty with citations, which can easily lead to plagiarism whether intentional or accidental. Some students struggle to paraphrase effectively or may not understand when and how to give credit to sources. This not only affects academic integrity but also undermines the students' ability to participate in scholarly discourse.

Finally, the layout or arrangement of formal writing is another area of concern. Academic texts often follow a structured form starting from an introduction that presents a thesis, to body paragraphs that support it with evidence, to a conclusion that

synthesizes key points. When students are unsure of how to plan or visually structure their writing, the result may be a disorganized text writing that lacks clarity and logical progression.

D. Conclusion

In summary, the view point of the first-year students reveal a range of significant challenges they face when writing in English at the academic level. These challenges include grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, weak organization of ideas, and unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions, spelling mistakes, and incorrect use of punctuation. Such issues can hinder the clarity, coherence, and academic quality of their writing. Addressing these problems requires targeted support, such as focused writing instruction, increased practice opportunities, and constructive feedback. By understanding and tackling these difficulties, educators and institutions can better support students' growth as confident and competent academic writers.

Here are also provided some recommendation based on the summary concerning the solution to face the problems in writing English by the first year students of university level.

1. Grammar workshops
Offer grammar-focused sessions to help students identify and correct common mistakes, fostering clearer sentence construction and more confident writing.
2. Vocabulary building activities
Encourage students to engage with new vocabulary through reading, interactive application, and writing exercises to expand their academic word bank and improve expression.
3. Structured writing guides
Provide step-by-step frameworks for organizing essays and academic reports, so students can better plan introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions.
4. Academic writing style training
Introduce students to the tone, formality, and conventions expected in academic writing through guided examples and comparative analysis.
5. Proofreading and editing practice

Incorporate spelling and punctuation exercises into writing tasks, along with opportunities for peer feedback and guided self-editing.

6. Personalized feedback

Offer constructive, individual feedback that targets specific problem areas and encourages incremental improvement.

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