

# EFL students' challenges in essay writing

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**Abstract:** *This study delves into the difficulties faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in essay writing, aiming to explore challenges from both the students' and the lecturer's perspectives. EFL learners often encounter obstacles that go beyond language skills, including cultural nuances and unfamiliar academic conventions. The research seeks to provide a detailed understanding of these challenges, shedding light on students' experiences and the instructor's viewpoint. By doing so, the study aims to offer insights that can inform teaching strategies, fostering a more supportive learning environment for EFL students in mastering the art of essay writing.*

**Key words:** *EFL, essay writing, challenges in writing*

## 1. Introduction

Writing skills is a paramount endeavor for students navigating the intricacies of a new linguistic landscape. Essay writing, in particular, stands as a cornerstone of academic expression, demanding a mastery of language conventions, organizational structures, and critical thinking abilities. As EFL students embark on the journey of composing essays, they encounter a myriad of challenges that extend beyond language proficiency, encompassing diverse aspects such as cultural nuances, unfamiliar rhetorical styles, and the nuanced expectations of academic discourse. This research endeavors to delve into the multifaceted challenges faced by EFL students in the domain of essay writing, exploring the intricacies that influence their writing experiences and, by extension, their academic success. Through a meticulous examination of these challenges, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the pedagogical approaches tailored to enhance EFL students' proficiency in essay writing and foster a more effective and inclusive learning environment.

## 2. Research contents

### 2.1. Literature review

#### *Academic writing skills*

Academic writing skills are crucial for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Proficiency in academic writing not only enhances language proficiency but also prepares students for success in various academic and professional settings. Academic writing teaches EFL learners how to express their ideas clearly and coherently. It helps them develop the ability to communicate complex thoughts and arguments effectively, which is valuable

in both academic and professional contexts. "When writing, students frequently have more time to think than they do in oral activities. They can go through what they know in their minds, and even consult dictionaries, grammar books, or other reference material to help them." (Hogue, 2008). Creating quality written content poses a formidable challenge for both language learners and native speakers alike. According to Grenville (2001), six writing processes can be applied universally to any type of writing. These processes encompass generating ideas or gathering information, selecting ideas or information, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing.

Academic writing outcomes should follow a procedural, systematic, clear, and easily comprehensible approach for the reader. According to Hogue (2008), academic writing necessitates specific skills such as understanding sentence structure (the arrangement of words in a sentence), organizing ideas effectively within a paragraph, and, naturally, mastering grammar and punctuation. Academic writing demands a set of specific skills that are integral to producing high-quality and effective written work. These skills include a nuanced understanding of sentence structure, encompassing the artful arrangement of words within a sentence. Proficiency in this aspect ensures that the written expression is not only grammatically correct but also conveys ideas with clarity and precision. This skill aids in creating a flow of thought that enhances the reader's comprehension and engagement with the content. Furthermore, mastering grammar and punctuation is essential for achieving a polished and academically sound writing style. A strong grasp of

grammar ensures the correct usage of language, while proper punctuation contributes to the clarity and coherence of written expressions. These elements collectively serve to elevate the overall quality of academic writing, making the text more compelling and professional.

#### *Errors in EFL students' essay writing*

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students often encounter several common errors in their writing. These errors can arise from linguistic differences, interference from their native language, or lack of familiarity with English grammar and conventions. From a linguistic perspective, errors can be categorized grammatically, encompassing issues in tenses, articles, word forms, and more. In a broader classification, scholars like Brown (2007), Corder (1991), and Ellis (1997) have identified four primary linguistic error categories: omission, addition, selection, and misordering.

According to Granville (2001), common errors in essay writing often manifest in the realms of grammar, word choice, and clarity. These issues can significantly impact the overall quality of an essay, hindering effective communication of ideas. Grammar errors, such as improper verb tense usage or subject-verb agreement issues, may create confusion and detract from the coherence of the writing. Inaccurate word choices, including the misuse of similar-sounding words or an overreliance on a limited vocabulary, can result in imprecise expressions and repetitive language. Moreover, lapses in clarity, marked by ambiguous sentence structures or insufficient transitions between ideas, can impede the reader's understanding of the content. Addressing these common pitfalls through careful proofreading, language refinement, and attention to structural clarity is essential for producing essays that effectively convey the intended message and meet the standards of academic or professional writing.

## **2.2. Research methodology**

### *Research design*

In the pursuit of understanding both students' challenges in writing and the hurdles faced by instructors in teaching writing, the researcher opted for a qualitative research approach for three distinct reasons. Firstly, this methodology was chosen to grasp and interpret the inherent occurrences in the lives of individuals or groups. In this specific context, the research seeks to comprehend the challenges students face in essay writing, inherent in the natural

events of the teaching and learning process within the classroom. To achieve this, the researcher employed open-ended questionnaires to unveil the issues encountered by students in essay writing. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the lecturer to gain valuable insights into the challenges faced while teaching writing. This qualitative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the intricacies surrounding the difficulties in writing from both the student and instructor perspectives.

### *Research subject*

The research participants consisted of 42 students in their fourth semester enrolled in the English Department at the Academy of Journalism and Communication. The primary goal of the writing course in the fourth semester was to equip students with the skills to compose various types of essays. This proficiency would then serve as a foundation for the subsequent semester's course, which places a particular emphasis on academic writing.

### *Research instrument*

To ensure a more comprehensive dataset, the researcher employed multiple research instruments, including interviews and questionnaires. Specifically, the following techniques were utilized:

**Open-ended questionnaires:** In this study, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to gather factual data about students' challenges in learning essay writing. The aim was also to understand their preferences and needs for enhancing their essay writing abilities.

**Semi-structured interview:** *A semi-structured interview format was employed to explore the lecturer's perspective on the challenging aspects encountered while teaching essay writing to the students. This method allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the instructor's experiences and insights.*

## **2.3. Finding and discussion**

### *Students' thoughts on their difficulties*

The open-ended questionnaire responses from students regarding challenges in learning essay writing reveal several common themes. One prevalent issue is organizational difficulty, with students expressing challenges in structuring paragraphs and ensuring a coherent flow of ideas. Another notable concern revolves around the use of academic vocabulary and maintaining a formal tone within their essays. Time management emerges as a significant hurdle, impacting the overall quality of students' written work.

The request for examples of well-written essays and constructive feedback on their work highlights a preference for practical, hands-on learning experiences. Additionally, students emphasize the potential benefits of interactive workshops or peer-review sessions, underscoring the importance of collaborative learning and feedback mechanisms in their quest to enhance essay writing skills.

These findings indicate that efforts to improve students' essay writing should prioritize addressing organizational challenges, offering guidance on academic language usage, and incorporating effective time management strategies. Additionally, the preference for practical examples and interactive sessions suggests that a comprehensive approach, combining theoretical guidance with practical application, could be advantageous for enhancing students' essay writing abilities.

#### ***Lecturer's perspective on challenges in teaching essay writing***

The insights gained from the semi-structured interview with the lecturer provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in teaching essay writing and the strategies employed to address these challenges.

##### *Challenges*

The lecturer identifies a significant challenge in catering to students with varying levels of proficiency in essay writing. This encompasses basic concerns such as sentence structure to more advanced concepts like crafting a strong thesis statement. This finding underscores the need for differentiated instruction to accommodate the diverse needs of the student population. Also, time management emerges as a challenge in providing detailed and constructive feedback to students. This issue highlights the inherent tension between the desire for thorough feedback and the practical constraints of timely grading. Many students tend to focus on summarizing information rather than engaging in the analytical and synthesizing aspects of effective essay construction. This highlights a pedagogical challenge in promoting higher-order thinking skills.

##### *Teaching Strategies Employed*

To address diverse skill levels, the lecturer employs the strategy of incorporating practical examples and real-world applications. This pedagogical approach not only provides tangible models for effective essay construction but also aligns with the principles

of experiential learning, enhancing students' understanding through application.

The use of peer-review sessions is highlighted as a beneficial strategy. This approach not only fosters a collaborative learning environment but also allows students to receive diverse feedback and perspectives. Peer collaboration is recognized as a valuable tool for enhancing the learning experience and promoting a sense of shared responsibility in the learning process.

In response to the challenge of encouraging critical thinking, the lecturer integrates prompts that require students to analyze and evaluate information. This strategy aligns with the pedagogical shift towards active learning and encourages students to go beyond surface-level understanding, fostering a deeper engagement with the material.

#### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has delved into the multifaceted challenges experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in the realm of essay writing, considering both the perspectives of the students and the instructor. Beyond the confines of language proficiency, EFL learners grapple with obstacles stemming from cultural nuances and unfamiliar academic conventions. Through a detailed exploration of these challenges, the research has provided valuable insights into the experiences of students and the viewpoints of instructors. The aim is to inform teaching strategies that can create a more supportive learning environment for EFL students as they strive to master the intricacies of essay writing. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, educators can tailor their approaches to better meet the diverse needs of EFL learners, facilitating a more effective and inclusive educational experience.

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