

# THE STUDENTS' WRITING DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING AN ESSAY BASED ON COGNITIVE PROCESS

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## Abstract

The main problem of this research was “what are the students’ writing difficulties in writing an essay at the fourth semester of Grade E? and what are factors to influence the students’ writing difficulties in writing an essay based on the cognitive process at the fourth semester of grade E? The objective was aimed to identify the students’ writing difficulties in writing an essay at the fourth semester of Grade E and the factors influencing the students’ writing difficulties in writing an essay based on the cognitive process at the fourth semester of Grade E. The subject was the students at the fourth semester which consists of twenty two students. This research used Qualitative Research method. The data are gathered from observation, document (students’ essays) and interview.

The findings showed that there are two types of students writing difficulties in writing an essay such as pre-writing and pre-drafting.

The result revealed that there are nine students who are difficult in pre-writing, and there are twelve students who are difficult in pre-writing drafting. Pre-writing difficulties are like difficulty in getting the topic while pre-drafting difficulties are like difficulty in getting topic and organizing the essay.

**Key Words:** Writing difficulties, Writing essay, cognitive process

## Introduction

Writing an English essay is one of the college student tasks especially for them who take English as their study. In writing an essay, the students need to have knowledge and skill in composing a good essay. To make a good essay, the students need to have basic knowledge by reading. It can help to comprehend the material which can be the topic of the essay as their choice. After they decide one topic to be an essay, they will start to construct the new idea from the reading. They take the keywords to develop their writing.

Talking about constructing idea and developing the writing, it refers to how the students begin to have a plan for writing an essay. In planning, they need to have the concepts of writing an essay that focuses on the main idea and related to the topic of the essay. By having these things, it makes the clear and logical organization of the essay with the real evidence or examples to support the main idea. Besides, in processing the essay, sometimes it becomes a big challenge. The challenge refers to the basic skill of writing. Writing is commonly known as a difficult skill to learn. It means that to get a good essay, the students need to master the grammatical rules and their immediacy in writing. Meanwhile, the teacher or lecture must be critical and creative in teaching this skill,

because sometimes the students are going to be stuck or confused to begin their writing. It needs a big effort to face this situation.

In teaching writing, there are some aspects to be concerned. Graves (1983) stated that in teaching writing the teachers focus on the learners, on what students need to learn rather than on what teachers need to teach. For the teachers, it is essential to develop a technique to encourage the students in a good learning situation and engage them to learn certain material effectively.

In EFL or ESL context, writing an essay is challenging. The EFL or ESL learners have some difficulties in it. Mostly, the students are difficult in deciding a topic for their essays. The students need to choose the theme first, which is provided by the lecture for their essay; for example, they take a theme of Education. However, it is only the general theme. Then, they need to decide one specific topic of education as their choice, for example, “The Changes of Indonesian Curriculum”.

After that, they need to write the first sentence as the main idea to develop their essay. To write the first sentence, they need to get some information from reading and try to make a conclusion by using their own words as the idea. Morgan (2016) argued that the students are going to be stuck when they want to begin their writing of the first idea or topic, they are confused to write the thesis statement that can be in the first or last sentence of the paragraph, they must consider to what the audience or reader who will read their essay also the purpose of the essay, they are mostly in fear or failure while writing because of how they express their idea, feeling and experience and sometimes the students must have a skill on how they cite the resources or quote the theories and paraphrasing. It means that the students’ difficulties are common problems that always happen, and there are reflected in the real classroom situation in writing subject.

Related to this, the cognitive process is the factor influencing the writing on how the students encounter their thinking, idea and ways to write their own essays. The process of thinking and remembering reflect the long- term memory in writing an essay because in cognitive process of writing need long-term memory to store knowledge. Storing knowledge is the basic cognitive process.

Flowers and Hayes (1981) stated that there are three parts in reflecting the writing included task environment, writer’s long-term memory and writing process. The task environment includes all of those things outside the writer's skin, starting with the rhetorical problem or assignment and eventually including the growing text itself. The second element is the writer's long-term memory in which the writer has stored knowledge, not only of the topic but of the audience and various writing plans. The third element in our model contains writing processes themselves, specifically the basic processes of Planning, Translating, and Reviewing, which are under the control of a Monitor. This method called as protocol (The Cognitive Process Model of the Composing Process). Based on this, the cognitive process happened naturally in the classroom situation, especially in writing class.

There are two studies which have been conducted in cognitive process of writing (Ece Sevgi, 2016; Forough & Ali, 2016). They found that the students have a similar

cognitive strategy and writing process of writing an essay. However, they only focus on the cognitive process in composing an essay and the writing quality. In contrast, the researcher is interested in investigating the cognitive process from the other side, which is writing difficulties in writing an essay. Related to this, the research will be focused on some indicators which will be explored and consist of a) teaching and learning process, b) content and language.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher concludes that essay as one of the academic writing types has some benefits for the students to learn. Lauren (2008) stated that writing essay might develop the students' critical thinking, develop the students' writing skills, help them in referencing or citation in academic essay writing and help students in deciding topic of the research. From these benefits, the students can be aware of the importance of writing essay and be active in practicing the writing an essay. Hence, the researcher would like to investigate the students' writing difficulties in writing an Essay based on their cognitive process. Therefore, this research will be determined the students' difficulties in writing an essay based on their cognitive process.

## **Literature**

### **Writing difficulties in writing an essay**

Briefly, writing the essay included three main processes, including Pre-writing, drafting and reviewing. Related to this, the students faced some difficulties. Morgan (2016) argues that the students are going to stuck when they want to begin their writing of the first idea or topic, they are confused to write the thesis statement that can be in the first or last sentence of the paragraph, they must consider to what the audience or reader who will read their essays also the purpose of the essay, they are mostly in fear or failure while writing because of how they express their idea, feeling and experience. Based on the explanation, all of the writing difficulties in writing an Essay will happen in writing essay process, and the essay is a part of basic academic writing form.

Talking about the concept of writing and learning experience, Ojima (2004) stated that the EFL or ESL learners use their own ways in making the concept of their writing. It can help them compose the writing based on their individual experience, motivation and tasks. It means that the learning experience is important for the students in learning writing.

### **Cognitive process in writing**

In the EFL context, the students acquire and learn the language based on their cognitive, in this case, the cognitive process which focuses on the writing an essay. The pupils are different in processing some information and composing a certain task. Therefore, there are some aspects that will influence it. According to Flower and Hayes (1981) that there are three parts in reflecting the writing included task environment, the writer's long term memory, and the writing process.

#### *a) Task environment*

In task environment, it is reflected in the rhetorical problems and the teaching writing. Flowers and Hayes (1981) argue that the rhetorical problems divided into two parts consists of rhetorical situation and goal setting. While the teaching writing is also divided into two parts, including teacher's instruction and teacher's explanation, both of

them are happened in the classroom setting. The teacher's instruction for the task is important for the students. It becomes the guidance for the students in doing the task. The teacher's instruction must be clear, explicit and logic. Besides, the teacher's explanation will help the students understand the materials in the classroom. Thus, the researcher needs to know all of the details parts which explain the theory of cognitive process in writing to help the researcher in gathering and analyzing the data.

*b) Writer's long term memory*

The writer's long term memory refers to how the writers stored the knowledge about the certain topic which is given from the teachers and the lecturer or the topic they choose and how the writer has Essay plans including the ways in classifying them into some paragraphs of introduction, main and conclusion.

*c) Writing process*

In writing process, it is reflected in how the student's stages in writing an essay. There are some stages in the writing process. Flowers and Hayes (1981) suggested that the three parts of writing process consist of planning, translating and reviewing. Planning refers to how the writers have a good plan for writing involves the topic and audience. Translating refers to how the writers in drafting or writing the whole of the essay. Reviewing refers to how the writer's in checking the whole organization of essay.

Based on the explanation, identifying student's cognitive process has a close relationship with the writing an essay, because it can identify how the students habit or attitude in writing and it can determine the student's writing difficulties.

## **Methodology**

Site of this research refers to English Department, English department was chosen because in English department there is a subject called Writing subject that correlates with this study, where this study will analyze the writing difficulties based on the cognitive process in writing an Essay. Writing subject is known as Writing for Academic Purpose, which learned about how to write an Essay. The writing difficulties will be determined, and it is reflected in the cognitive process in writing an Essay (how the student's stages in writing an Essay). The participant of this research is English Department Students. It is chosen because they are in the fourth semester. It tends to take them because they learned about the Essay. This study takes Grade E. The total number of students is twenty-one students.

This research used qualitative research. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the mean in individuals or groups that describe a social or human problem. This research of student's writing difficulties in writing an essay based on the cognitive process categorized as the Qualitative research, because it investigated the nature of classroom teaching and learning process which focused on writing difficulties in writing an essay based on their cognitive process.

## **Technique of Collecting Data**

In collecting the data, this research used some instruments, including observation, document and interview. Observation process is to observe the teaching and learning

process in writing for academic purposes, document and interview, to identify the students writing difficulties in an essay and also to identify the cognitive process.

### **Technique of Analyzing Data**

In analyzing the data, this research used the data analysis derived from Miles and Huberman's theory. Miles and Huberman(1994) stated that there were three basics ways in analyzing the data involves data reduction, data display and conclusion.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Students writing difficulties in writing an essay**

In writing an essay, there were three stages, including pre-writing, drafting and reviewing. Hence, it can identify their difficulties in each stage of essay. One of the parts was pre-writing. There were nine students who had difficulties in it. They were difficult to get the topic of the essay because they did not have any information about the topic, and they were difficult to have the first idea or plan before they started to write.

Then, there were twelve students had difficulties in pre-writing and drafting. They were difficult in finding the topic and organizing or arranging the essay, because they need to look for the topic and the information of it. Besides, they were difficult in writing the paragraphs of essay including (thesis statement in introduction, body of paragraph and conclusion), grammar and vocabularies.

#### *Students' writing difficulties in writing an essay based on the cognitive process*

This part explained the students' writing difficulties in writing an essay based on the cognitive process. It is important to identify students' cognitive process (task environment, long-term memory and writing process) which can influence the students' difficulties in writing an essay (pre-writing, drafting and reviewing).

The cognitive process in writing an essay involves task environment, long-term memory and writing process (Flowers and Hayes, 1981). All of them will describe as follow:

##### *a) Task environment in writing an essay*

Task environment refers to how the students understand about the topic and audience before writing an essay which also include the teaching and learning process, which is in Writing for academic purposes. As a result from observation, it was found that from five meetings with some materials including argumentative essay, compare-contrast essay, cause- effect, referencing and paraphrasing in APA style 6<sup>th</sup>, the lecturer explained about definition of argumentative essay, the function of the text and generic structure. The lecturer used common English vocabularies in explaining the materials and good structure of language to help the students in understanding the materials. Then, lecturer divided them into some groups and asked each group to read the text carefully. Lecturer asked each group about the meaning in the paragraph of the essay, and students tried to identify the generic structure of the kinds of essay. (introduction, pro arguments, cons arguments and conclusion).

However, there were some students difficult in determining the thesis statement of the essay, and they gave less feedback when the lecturer ask about the essay content. The reason for this, because they little bit understand the essay.

*b) Writers' Long-term memory*

The writers' long-term memory refers to how the writer stored the knowledge about the certain topic which by their own and how the students' had their plan for writing the essay. As a result, it was found that the students who had difficulties in pre-writing, they made the brainstorming, they only had little previous knowledge of the topic, they got the topic by themselves and the topic related to the current issues or phenomenon and personal experience, and they read some articles related to the topic. From twenty- one students, there were nine students who difficult in pre-writing, they said: "Before we start to write, we must think what should we write and it is not easy to establish the topic, and we must be much reading and also have to understand about what topic that suitable for the essay." It was then proved that they had difficulty in this part.

Then, the student's difficulties in pre writing and drafting, there were eleven students made the brainstorming and one student did not make brainstorming of the topic, they had the previous knowledge of the topic, they read the articles which related to the topic, they got the topic by themselves and the topic related to the current issues or phenomenon and personal experience. The proved can be seen in their statements, and they said: "It is difficult to choose the good topic and we think difficult in how to make good sentences, grammar, sentence structure, and vocabularies in the essay."

*c) Writing process*

*The students' difficulties in pre-writing (Planning)*

It was found that there were nine students who difficult in pre-writing that different quality of planning. In this part, they wrote the brainstorming. They were PR(4), PR(6), PR(8), PR(9), PR(11), PR(12), PR(13), PR(16) and PR(17). In planning, most of them had a quite good in the relevance of the topic and points, while they were bad in the elaboration of topic and complexity of plans. In drafting, most of them got a good score in the essay in range of 77-100.

In reviewing, they were quite good in aspect of writing, including compositional of organization, cohesion, grammar, vocabularies, punctuation and spelling.

*The students difficulties in pre-writing (Planning) and drafting (Translating)*

It was found that there were twelve students were difficult in pre-writing (planning) and drafting (translating). The eleven students made brainstorming, and one student did not make the brainstorming. In this part, they wrote the brainstorming. They were PR(1), PR(2), PR(3), PR(5), PR(7), PR(10), PR(14), PR(15), PR(18), PR(19), PR(20) and PR(21). In planning, most of them had a bad in the relevance of the topic and points, while they were bad in the elaboration of topic and complexity of plans. In drafting, most of them got an enough and bad score in the essay in a range of 38-72.

In reviewing, they were bad in the aspect of writing, including compositional of organization, cohesion, grammar, vocabularies, punctuation.

*Students' writing difficulties in writing an essay*

Pre-writing refers to the first activity before beginning the writing. Based on the data it showed that the students who are difficult in pre-writing, they were difficult to get the topic of the essay because they did not have any information about the topic. They were difficult to have the first idea or plan before they started to write while pre-drafting. It refers to what activity or things to do before writing and how the students begin their writing essay. They were difficult in getting the topic of the essay and in organizing or arranging the essay, because they need to write the sentences (thesis statement in introduction, body of paragraph and conclusion), grammar and vocabularies. All of these results, it is supported to Morgan (2006) the students are going to stuck when they want to begin their writing of the first idea or topic, they are confused to write the thesis statement that can be in the first or last sentence of the paragraph, they must consider to what the audience or reader who will read their essay also the purpose of the essay, they are mostly in fear or failure while writing because of how they express their idea, feeling and experience. In other words, the students have different difficulties for each stage in writing an essay. They also had different knowledge in writing.

*Students' writing difficulties in writing an essay based on the cognitive process*

It was found that the students learned some materials including argumentative essay, compare-contrast essay, cause-effect essay, and APA styles 6<sup>th</sup>. During the lesson for some meetings and the materials, some of the students were understanding about the material, but the other students were confused about the material. The reason for this, because some of them focus and give good feedback and the other students do not focus and get confused in learning essay. Moreover, the students had a good plan for reading based on what topic they choose. They look for more information and focus on one type of essay to guide them in the brainstorming of the topic, they only have little previous knowledge of the topic, they get the topic by themselves and the topic related to the current issues or phenomenon and personal experience and they read some articles related to the topic. Then, the students write an essay by making the brainstorming firstly.

For the students who had difficulties in pre-drafting, they were difficult in finding the topic and organizing or arranging the essay (writing the thesis statement in introduction, body of paragraph and conclusion), grammar and vocabularies, because they need to determine the topic and the information of it. All parts of the writing process was a very important thing that related to the students' writing difficulties because it refers to how the students begin their writing until they finished their writing an essay. There are twelve students who are difficult in pre-writing –drafting and nine students are difficult in pre-writing. The main thing is that they have a problem with writing or organizing the essay, because they are lack of grammar and vocabularies.

Based on the result, the data finding does not overall support the theory from Flowers and Hayes(1981) argue that there are three parts in reflecting the writing included task environment, writers' long term memory and writing process (planning, translating and reviewing). In fact, the researcher found something new that there are no students who are difficult in reviewing. The reason for this, because how the students can review their essays, meanwhile they are difficult in drafting especially lack of grammar. It means that reviewing influenced by drafting. If the students who do not have difficulty in drafting,

they will know how to review their essays whether the essay has good grammar and so on. Besides, the students have two difficulties at the same time, when they write their essay. The students are not only difficult in choosing the topic but also difficult in writing their own essay, this case known as pre-writing and drafting.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the result of research, it can be concluded that students divided into two types of pre-writing and pre-writing and drafting. Pre-writing refers to the difficulty in getting the topic of the essay and pre-drafting refers to the nature of teaching and learning process also topic and audience. Moreover, the cognitive process is the factors influencing the students writing difficulties in writing an essay. Based on the data, a cognitive process which consists of the task environment, writers' long term memory and writing process (planning, translating and reviewing) can determine what types of difficulties in writing an essay and it can influence the students in writing the essay. In task environment, it can determine the students' understanding about the materials given by the lecturer, writer's long term memory determine the students' knowledge about the topic for their essay and writing process can determine what types and parts in the stages of essay which have problem or difficulties including planning and translating.

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