

# Writing Challenges and Strategies in ESP Contexts: Pharmacy Students' Perception

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## ABSTRAK

Banyak pembelajar Bahasa Inggris untuk tujuan khusus (ESP) mengalami kesulitan dalam proses menulis. Mahasiswa di perguruan tinggi diharuskan membuat esai yang sulit dan mungkin membuat mahasiswa frustrasi. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis aspek-aspek tersulit dalam menulis yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa farmasi yang belajar di sebuah universitas di Jambi dan bagaimana tantangan tersebut mungkin berhubungan dengan strategi menulis mereka. Ini adalah studi survei untuk menyoroti faktor-faktor utama yang dapat menyebabkan kesulitan dalam pandangan mereka. Instrumen yang digunakan adalah kuesioner untuk mengumpulkan data penelitian ini. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa tantangan yang paling umum adalah terkait tata bahasa dan struktur kalimat serta organisasi, koherensi, dan kohesi. Lainnya terkait dengan parafrase. Kesimpulan lain yang dapat diambil adalah strategi yang paling membantu, dari sudut pandang siswa, adalah menulis garis besar/rencana esai, umpan balik khusus dari guru, menggunakan kamus, membaca ekstensif tentang topik, dan memeriksa model penulisan.

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## ABSTRACT

Many ESP learners encountered difficulties from the writing process. Students in higher education institution are required to produce essays, which are difficult and may frustrate students. The purpose of this study was to analyse the most difficult aspects of writing faced by pharmacy students studying in a university in Jambi and how those challenges might relate to their writing strategies. This is a survey study to shed light on the key factors that could cause those difficulties in their point of view. The instrument used was questionnaire to gather the data of this study. The results showed that the most common challenges is related to grammar and sentence structure as well as organization, coherence and cohesion. Others are related to paraphrasing. Another conclusion which can be drawn is the most helpful strategies, from students point of view, are writing an outline/plan for the essay, specific feedback by the teacher, using a dictionary, extensive reading about the topic, examining writing model.

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**Introduction**

Many students are worried about writing especially in English. Unlike speaking, writing requires a lot of preparations and aspects, which have to be considered, causing students to feel frustrated and nervous. One of the most problems students face in writing is what should be written and how to write. According to Shang (2012) when students are asked to write an English composition, they may get nervous because they are afraid of making mistakes in language forms such as grammar and vocabulary. The students found difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language.

Nunan (1989) stated that writing is a very cognitive activity that requires students to pay attention to various factors in writing. It is true that to be able to write, students have to follow a number of writing aspects. In the case of writing an essay, students are required to convey arguments and develop ideas precisely. Hyland (2003) classifies the organization of writing in the different focus: language structures, text functions, themes or topics, creative expression, composing process, content, genre and contexts of writing. Referring to those organizations, students need to consider all of the rules in their writing process. Sometimes, some students lack confidence and are unmotivated after knowing the numbers of requirements. Moreover, many students have difficulty in finding appropriate theories, combining ideas, correcting sentence structure, and they still feel doubts in writing. Those difficulties may occur because students' English language proficiency is relatively low. Furthermore, linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling are included as factors that affect students' writing performance.

It is argued that writing is not a natural activity; it is a cognitive activity characterized by complexity in which the writer must demonstrate control over multiple variables simultaneously (Nunan 1989). Variables include thinking, relevant knowledge, ideas, and vocabulary (Anwar & Ahmed, 2016). Writing components identified by Ampa and Quraisy (2018) are structure, vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics. Thus, students need to overcome the complexity to compose correctly. In addition to the linguistic skills involved, the writing process includes steps that students should follow towards the final production of the writing piece, such as generating ideas, organizing, drafting, revising, and editing (Khattar, 2019).

According to Hadley (1993), writing requires composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narrative or description, or to transform information into new texts as in expository or argumentative writing. Writing is a complicated process which involves a number of cognitive and metacognitive activities, for instance, brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting and revising. Cognitive aspects of writing have received a particular attention, as investigators have attempted to understand the thought process underlying the compositions of students (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

## Method

This survey was conducted in an ESP class majoring pharmacy of Semester II 2022/2023, in a private university, in Jambi. The total number of subjects was 90 students. Questionnaires were used to gather the data. It includes four sections: students' biodata, students' attitudes towards academic writing and behaviour, the difficulties they face when writing and the helpful strategies in writing an essay. The current study aimed at answering about the basic academic writing difficulties encountered by ESP students studying in higher education and the helpful strategies.

## Result and Discussion

Findings of this study have been divided into three parts, attitudes of the participants towards writing, general difficulties encountered by students when writing assignments, and the most helpful strategies in writing an essay.

### Result

Figure 1 illustrates what the participants think about academic writing. It can be clearly seen that the majority of them find writing in English difficult and none of them said that it is easy. Only 15% (n= 13) of the respondents reported that it is neither difficult nor easy.

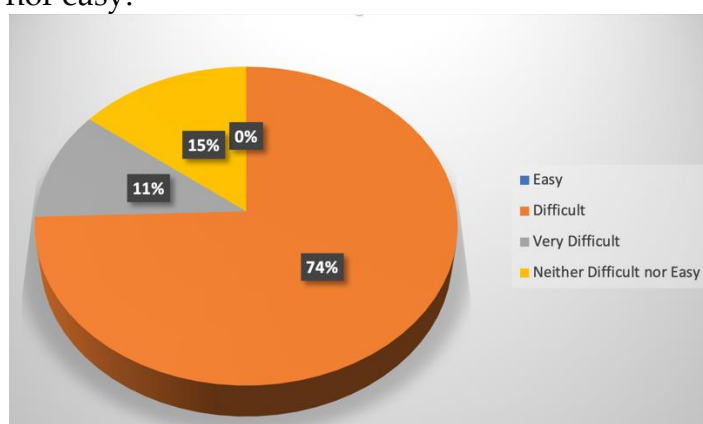


Figure 1: Attitudes of participants towards academic writing

According to participants' responses, there are four basic difficulties shared by most of the participants. As it is shown in figure 2, the most frequent difficulty is grammar and sentence structure followed by organization, coherence, and cohesion. On the contrary, punctuation, summarising, and spelling were reported to be the least problematic. In the following, those difficulties are presented and discussed separately.

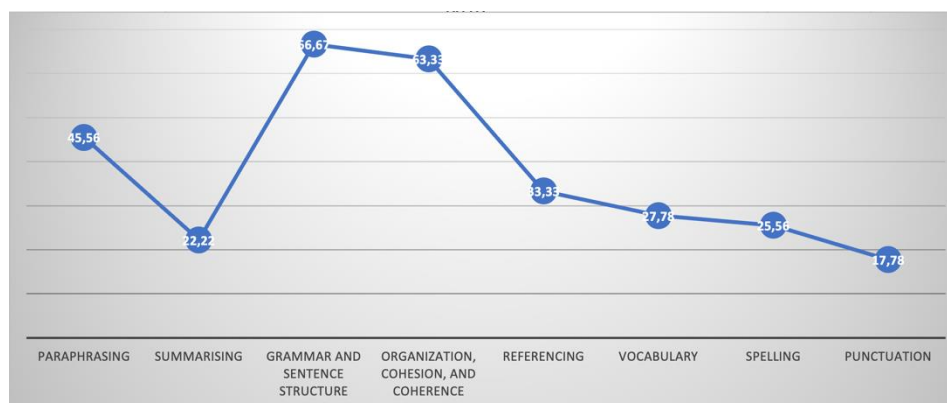


Figure2: Major difficulties encountered by graduate certificate students when writing assignments

In vocabulary, results demonstrate that students' vocabulary is limited and simple, and they do not possess enough vocabulary items. Only 47,78% expressed their ability to use new words, while half of them resorted to repetition of words they already know. In the area of spelling, results show that spelling simple words or words known to students is not an issue, while it is challenging for them to spell new or more extended words, 51.5% each. Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Vocabulary

Statement	Strongly agree & Agree (Percentage of Responses)
I use simple words in my writing	60%
I have limited vocabulary	62,22%
Writing is difficult for me because I do not have enough vocabulary items	51,11%
I can use different words to express the same meaning in English	45,56%
I repeat the same words when I write	56,67%
Using proper vocabulary (vocabulary that is related to the topic) is difficult for me	55,56%
I use new words when I write	47,78%

Table 2. Spelling

Statement	Strongly agree & Agree (Percentage of Responses)
I can spell simple words	86,67%
I can spell words that I already know correctly	95,56%
It is difficult for me to write the correct spelling of new words	66,67%
Spelling longer words is difficult for me	60%
Having silent letters in some English words make spelling difficult for me	62,22%

In grammar and sentence structure, roughly two-thirds of students use simple sentences most of the time. The highest being 77,78% for using the correct verb tense, followed by 74,44% for using the correct word in order in a sentence. The lowest response, 46,67%, was for using prepositions. As for organization, cohesion, and coherence, the highest being 76,67% for establishing a connection between the paragraphs in an essay, followed by 73,33% for providing supporting sentences in a paragraph. The lowest response, 45,56%, was for writing an introduction to an essay.

Table 3. Grammar and sentence structure

Statement	Strongly agree & Agree (Percentage of Responses)
I tend to use simple sentences most of the time	88,89%
It is difficult for me to use the correct verb tense	77,78%
It is difficult for me to use the passive voice	62,22%
It is difficult for me to use the correct word order in a sentence	74,44%
Articles (a, an & the) are confusing	44,44%
Pronouns confuse me	48,89%
Using prepositions is confusing	46,67%
I sometimes write sentences without verbs	66,67%

Table 4. Organization, cohesion, and coherence

Statement	Strongly agree & Agree (Percentage of responses)
It is difficult to provide supporting sentences in a paragraph	73,33%
It is difficult for me to establish a connection between the paragraphs in an essay	76,67%
It is difficult for me to connect ideas in the same paragraph	53,33%
It is difficult for me to write a clear topic sentence	51,11%
It is difficult for me to write an introduction to an essay	45,56%
It is difficult for me to write a conclusion to an essay	47,78%

Results for paraphrasing and summarizing area also varied among students. 86,67% of students expressed their ability to paraphrase simple sentences. Though 88,89% believed reading the text more than once helps in understating, it is difficult for 88,89% of students to paraphrase the text and for 50% of them to summarise it even after understanding.

Table 5. Paraphrasing &amp; Summarising

Statement	Strongly agree & Agree (Percentage of responses)
I can paraphrase simple sentences	86,67%
I understand the text when I read it more than once	88,89%
I find long sentences difficult to understand	60%
It is difficult to paraphrase paragraphs	88,89%
Even after understanding the meaning, I cannot paraphrase the text correctly	66,67%
When paraphrasing, it is difficult for me to understand the original text	44,44%
I cannot differentiate between the main idea and the supporting ideas when I read	47,78%
Even after understanding the text, I find it difficult to summarise	50%

Table 6. Strategies

Statement	Strongly agree & Agree (Percentage of responses)
Specific feedback by the teacher (feedback only to me)	93,33%
Using a dictionary	92,22%
Extensive reading about the topic	88,89%
Examining good examples of essays written by others	86,67%
General feedback by the teacher	72,22%
Writing an outline/plan for the essay	94,44%
Writing multiple drafts	55,56%
Working with a peer (another student)	51,11%
Working in groups	50%

From the students' perspective, the most helpful strategy is writing an outline/plan for the essay, with a percentage of responses mounting to 94,44% of students also believe that general feedback given to class is helpful. High responses are also obtained for receiving specific (individual) feedback from the teacher (93,33%) and the usefulness of using dictionaries (92,22%). The percentage of examining good examples of essays written by others is 86,67%. Reading extensively about the topic is helpful to 88.89% of students.

However, pair work and group work are considered the least useful from the students' point of view. Only 51,11% of them thought that working with a peer is helpful, and 50% thought that group work is beneficial. Though these results of areas of collaborative learning are still substantial, collaborative learning is the least helpful from the point of view of students compared to other strategies examined in the questionnaire.

## Discussion

Most of the students stated that it was difficult to use the correct verb tense therefore they tended to use simple sentences most of the time. While writing students face grammatical problems more than data organization problems. Most of the students memorizing grammatical rules is the major problem in writing task. From their point of view their writing tasks are marked based on usage of grammar. Grammar cannot be granted as the only factor or the most important factor for language teaching. He added that there should be a balance between grammar-oriented and communication-oriented activities in the successful foreign language classroom.

Writers usually aim at producing a piece of writing where the vocabulary is carefully chosen, the sentences are logically related, the ideas are clearly expressed, and the paragraphs are coherent. Based on students' responses, the data indicates that a considerable number of them (67) are aware of establishing connection between the paragraph in an essay, yet they find achieving them quite difficult. Wenyu and Yang (2008) indicate that students who follow a clear outline and plan find it easy to organize their ideas and relate them to each other.

According to the participants' responses, this issue involves two aspects; paraphrasing, and summarising. About 88% of the participants consider difficult to paraphrase. That might be due to involving lots of details and the lack of awareness of its significance (Wallace, Schirato, & Bright, 1999). Considering paraphrasing skill, Yasuda (2004) points out that it was the most difficult aspect for her case subjects. Appropriate use of the sources without stepping on the spot of what is called the academic crime (plagiarism) is one of the crucial issue second language learners should be aware of. Pecorari (2008) explains how to assist students to avoid plagiarism and use the references appropriately. She believes that it is not enough to tell learners about how serious this topic is; rather they should provide them with enough examples and make sure that they are knowledgeable about how to paraphrase other writers' words, use quotations, and accurately write citations and reference lists.

Abdulkareem (2013) asserts that teaching students how to brainstorm ideas can contribute in minimizing their problems in academic writing. About 94,44% agreed with this statement. Furthermore, Al Fadda (2012) concludes that preparing an outline of their topics before starting to write, and following the three main stages (planning, writing, and editing) might assist novice writers to be successful in academic writing. Introducing learners to academic writing strategies and how to develop ideas, and that could help them in their writing throughout the semester as Crosby (2009) suggests. She indicates that it could be essential to give learners

samples to identify their structures, organizations, cohesive devices and the other key features. For instance, authentic items could play a substantial role to achieve that objective (Wenyu and Yang, 2008). Readings such as books, journals, and even some websites are invaluable source on which learners could rely to enrich their lexicon with academic vocabulary and expressions (Gordon, 2008). Therefore, as Gordon believes, they will be able to effectively express their views and ideas in their own voice.

## Conclusion

Some solutions can be suggested to avoid writing difficulties presented above and thus improve writing proficiency. Various basic points should be taken into consideration when dealing with writing especially in ESP contexts. Learners should also select what interests them to write about and focus on the quality of the writing they produce. When students write about topics of their interests, this motivates them to keep reading and selecting what significant to them even if they encounter difficulties. It is importance to do the diagnostic tests at the beginning of the semester in order to identify students' problems and needs according to which the content of the program will be tailored. The examples of the areas that should be covered which are making students autonomous learners, exposing them to different types of references, asking them to intensively read, and improving their analytical skills. That is they should be trained how to write not merely what to write.

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