

**INVESTIGATING EFL LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES AND  
STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC WRITING SKILL:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Writing is an important aspect of language development and should be of primary interest and concern to teachers, students, and academics. The researchers found a research gap by observing that in the field of research, there are a lot of students who have difficulties in writing and still do not know the strategy to solve their problems. This study aims to identify the writing difficulties that students face, as well as strategies for overcoming those difficulties. A descriptive qualitative research method was used in this study. The researchers used a questionnaire to collect the data. The participants were twenty-five 5th semester students from the English department, Universitas Tidar in the academic year 2021/2022. The result of the study showed that nine students encountered difficulties in grammar, eight students had problems with an academic style, and three students encountered difficulties in the organization of writing and vocabulary. Furthermore, independent writing is one of the most common strategies employed by students. Understanding the difficulties of students and strategies for writing skills will have a good impact on the outcome of the learning process.*

Keyword : *EFL learners, Writing, Writing difficulties, Writing strategies*

**INTRODUCTION**

English is an international language that students in Indonesia are required to study. The use of English in the learning curriculum in Indonesia is significant because it enables students to adapt to global concerns and gain access to digital technology (Isadaud, Fikri, and Bukhari, 2022). According to Riadil (2019), writing is one of the most important English skills for students in Indonesia to master. It is a crucial skill that greatly aids in the process of language learning. Despite this, writing is regarded as a difficult skill, particularly for most English as a foreign language (EFL) learner, who confront numerous problems in writing. Ahmadi & Reza (2018) argued that when conveying feelings, ideas, and emotions in writing,

learners, particularly those learning English as a foreign language (EFL), spend more time and must emphasize their attentiveness. It happens because the writers are influenced by their experience in their first language and limited linguistic knowledge.

Previous studies have found that university students in Indonesia still have difficulties in writing in English. According to Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017), Indonesian EFL university students struggled with essay writing grammar, cohesiveness, coherence, paragraph organization, diction, and spelling problems. Hasan and Marzuki (2017) also examined the English writing abilities of university students in Riau by assigning them writing tasks to complete in a set amount of time. Their findings revealed that the students' work contained grammatical issues involving plural forms, articles, verb forms, clauses, passive voice, and prepositions. Similarly, according to Toba, Noor, and Sanu (2019), Indonesian EFL university students continue to struggle with writing components such as content, organisation, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Their reasons for experiencing these problems included not only a lack of knowledge of writing aspects and the comparison and contrast essay itself, but also personal factors such as a lack of writing practice, a dislike for writing, a negative writing perception, a lack of writing motivation, insufficient time given in writing tests, and insufficient teaching writing process taught by their teachers. In addition to this, Williams (2012) believes that first language will influence foreign language writing in several ways, such as the writing process, which causes the writer to struggle due to a lack of linguistic understanding.

In addition to minimizing the difficulty of writing, it would be better if the writer becomes a good reader. Olson (2021) claims that reading and writing are two things connected. It means that writing and reading are a process in which the writer or the reader interact with a text. Williams (2012) states that reading is one of the ways of developing competence in writing. Reading also helps kids improve their writing skills, especially when the students have high reading habits, they become more familiar with the vocabulary, sentence patterns, organization flow, idioms and cultural assumptions. Moreover, nowadays the existence and development of media and social networking services are easily found everywhere.

Furthermore, Kirby and Crovitz (2013) state that teaching writing skill in the class is something challenging that is faced by educators or teachers. Based on that, the appearance of strategies is needed in this skill, because through strategies they will surely have a good impact on their writing. There are four strategies in writing skills. First, independent writing. Independent writing is a strategy that has a goal to give students chances to dig their skills in

writing with different text types without the teacher's guidance and peers. In independent writing, pupils learn to identify the objective of their writing and use some skills to help them finish their writing tasks. This strategy helps learners become aware of their writings and increase their self-assessment.

Second, think-aloud strategy is one kind of strategy which aims to engage learners in writing which functions as a stimulator. Vandeveldt et al. (2015) defines that think aloud as a method that students are saying aloud what they are thinking which helps them edit and organize their writing. Indeed, think-aloud can be used as a comprehensive range of skills, knowledge, and understanding in writing. Third, modelled writing. Buehl (2017) stated that teachers use this strategy to allow pupils to gain knowledge, vocabulary, and text structure required to write for a range of goals. The models that are used in this strategy are the real world such as articles, literary work, newspaper, depending on the teacher selection. Fourth, Guided writing. Guided writing is a strategy where the teachers have a role in fostering and facilitating student's writing.

Based on the problems mentioned above, the researchers formulated two research questions as follow:

1. What are the writing difficulties faced by fifth-year students at Tidar University?
2. What are the writing strategies used by the fifth semester students at Tidar University to improve their English writing?

Moreover, the objectives of this research are stated below:

1. To identify writing difficulties faced by fifth-year students at Tidar university.
2. To examine writing strategies used by fifth-semester students at Tidar University to improve their English writing.

## **METHOD**

This study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach. It means that qualitative researchers study things in a natural setting that make sense and interpret phenomena. In the descriptive qualitative approach, we conducted a study of the writing difficulties at Tidar university. Moreover, the researchers used questionnaires to collect the data. The researchers used open-ended questions that are used in qualitative surveys to generate long-form written/typed responses. Questions will be designed to elicit perspectives, experiences, narratives, or stories. They are frequently used as a prelude to interviews or focus groups since they assist in identifying early themes or concerns to be explored further in the study. According to Brace (2018), questionnaires are a few written instruments that present

respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they must respond by selecting from or composing the existing response.

The object of the research was conducted at Tidar University especially for students in the fifth-semester of academic year 2021/2022. The participants were twenty-five students both female and male. In collecting the data, the researchers used a questionnaire. Here the type of questions is mixed between multiple-choice questions where the respondents are asked to choose their answers that provide a justification for the selection, and closed questions where the respondents are required to choose 'yes' or 'no' answers. The researchers used the item objective congruence (IOC) index on this research as the basis for screening and asked some experts to give suggestions and reviews to validate the questionnaires.

In collecting the data, first, the researchers selected a case found in the class in which the researchers did some observation of the students at the class by checking their scoring result and did a survey to some students by asking questions while teaching in the class. Second, the researchers understand the case by relating it with writing skill theory. After that, the researchers looked for a questionnaire to collect the data. Third, the researcher makes a link to the survey in the google form. Fourth, the researchers share the link of the questionnaire to twenty-five students in skill one, fifth semester and wait for the respondent. After getting the responses from the students, the researchers tried to analyze the difficulties in writing skills and give solutions to them by implementing strategies in writing skill to enhance their writing skill. Finally, the research drew the conclusion based on the findings in this research.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Findings***

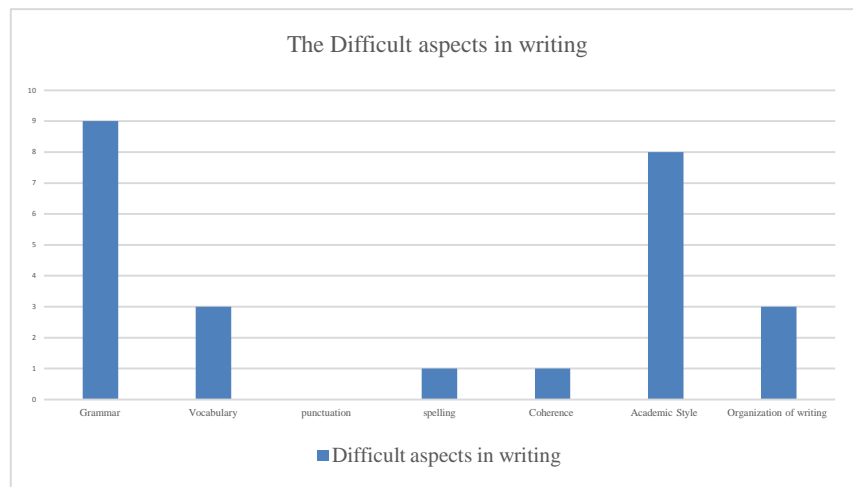
The findings section will be divided into two parts as there are two questions of the project. The first section concerns the difficulties of writing. The second concern with the major strategies to solve the difficulties of writing. After distributing the online questionnaires and the students filled it, the researchers gathered the data and classified the writing difficulties. The result of the student's writing difficulties as follows:

### ***The difficulties in writing***

Based on the questionnaire the majority of the students are interested in learning writing. Most of the respondents are females with high motivation in writing. Although they

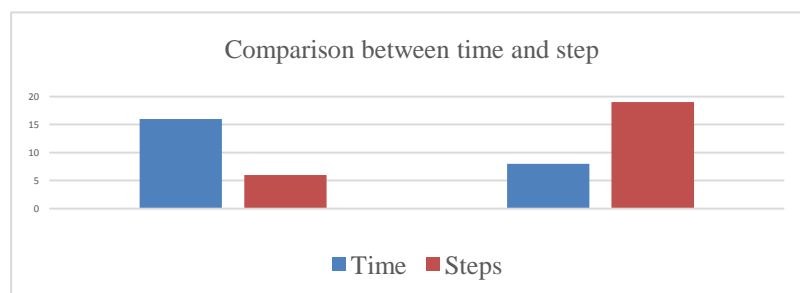
have high motivation in writing, they have low proficiency in writing. There are some difficult aspects of writing.

**Figure 1: The Difficult Aspect in Writing**



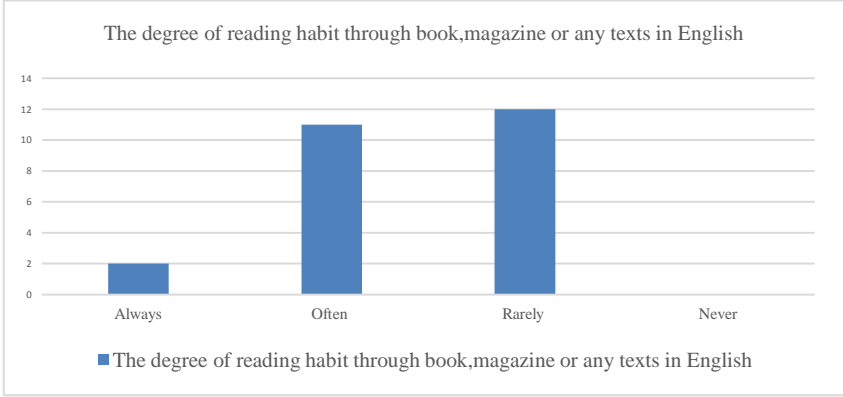
Based on figure 1, the most difficult aspect of writing is grammar with a total of nine people. Then, academic style eight people, organization of writing and vocabulary three people, spelling and coherence one person and zero for punctuation. Here the researchers just explain the three main aspects of difficulties in writing. Firstly, grammar concerns. It may be caused by a poor understanding and practice of grammar rules. Besides, it also comes from the effect of the first language. Secondly, academic style. It is because of the various requirements of each text type and patterns such as sentence structure, transitions, academic word, and so on. These features may cause some problems for students if they cannot distinguish between non-academic and academic writing. Thirdly, the organization of writing and vocabulary. In the organization of writing sometimes the learners are confused about how to arrange their writing. Besides the vocabulary, sometimes students find it difficult to find exact words each time when they write. Indeed, students who are EFL learners that lack vocabulary, misuse of vocabulary items, less experience and practice in using a word which causes the repetition of word and ambiguity of meaning in writing.

**Figure 2: The Comparison between Time and Step which Effect Writing Difficulties**



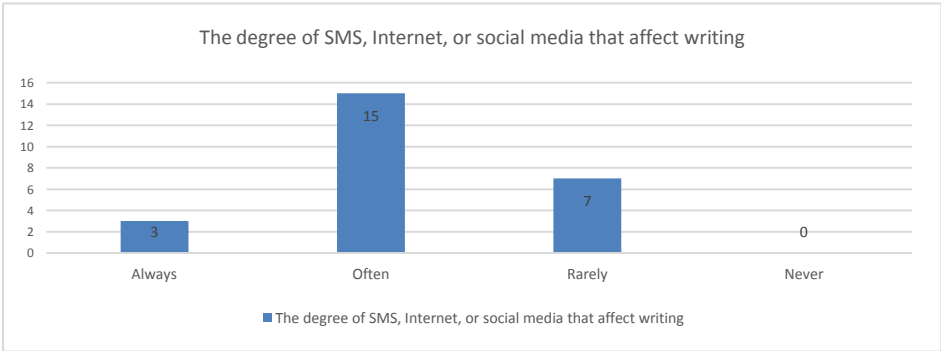
Based on figure 2, time and step also give the effect in writing. Around sixteen people lack time in the classroom when writing while eight people felt that they have enough time when writing in the classroom. In addition, the students who lack the time do not follow the step like the position in the chart which shows the chart of steps lower than the time with six students who follow the steps. On the other hand, students who have enough time follow the steps in the process of writing. It is clear that the chart of steps is higher, that is, sixteen people who follow the step than the chart of time. Therefore, providing sufficient time is a crucial part to give students a chance to think properly in order to get a good output of writing.

**Figure 3: The Degree of Reading Habit which Effect Writing Difficulties**



Based on figure 3, most of the students with a total of twelve students rarely have the reading habit in English, eleven students often read, two people always read and the remaining students indicated that they never read. Moreover, reading and writing are connected to each other. The skill of reading should have a role in the writing session. According to Acheaw & Larson (2014), reading materials were useful in assisting students in generating and constructing ideas for writing. Furthermore, Safitri (2018) noted that writing has a significant association with reading, because reading is a step in the writing process that functions as information provision.

**Figure 4: The Degree of SMS, Internet, or Social Media that Effect the Difficulties of Writing.**

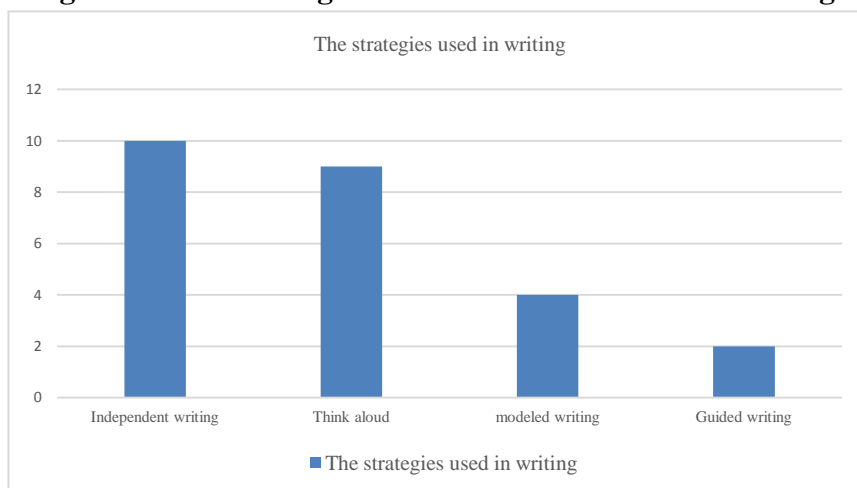


Based on figure 4, most of the students often use SMS, internet or social media in writing with a total of fifteen students, seven people rarely use the internet, three students always use SMS or social media and zero students never use English via SMS, internet or social media. These results show that students have a positive belief that writing via SMS, internet or social media affects their proficiency in English writing. Moreover, the existence of technologies plays a crucial role in students' learning writing.

### *Strategies in writing*

This part answers the second research question which is the strategies to face the difficulties in writing. Kirby and Crovitz (2013) suggested that there are four strategies in writing. They are independent writing, think aloud, modelled writing, and guided writing. The details of the result presented in the figure.

**Figure 5: The Strategies to Face the Difficulties in Writing**



Based on figure 5 the data show that of the strategies that up to ten students use independent writing strategy, nine of students prefer to use think aloud strategy, four students use modelled writing strategy, and two students use guided writing. These results indicate that every student has different strategies in writing. It happens due to their personal preferences. Student strategy choices are based on their past experiences in writing and the result after they decide the strategies that they want. Moreover, most of them use independent strategy as their writing strategy.

### **Discussion**

#### *The Writing Difficulties Faced by Fifth-Semester Students at Tidar University*

The current research investigated the writing difficulties encountered by Tidar University fifth-semester students in seven areas: grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, coherence, academic style, and writing structure. According to the research findings, nine

students struggle with grammar in writing, eight students struggle with writing organization, three students struggle with vocabulary, one student struggles with spelling and coherence, and none with punctuation.

Grammar and syntax are the most frequently encountered language difficulties in student writing. These flaws include incorrect use of prepositions, adjectives, tenses, singular/plural verbs, sentence structure, and informal and spoken idioms. Learners struggle with vocabulary because they fail to consider the collocation and connotation of the meaning or phrases in English. These research results are similar to those of Lesmana and Arifin (2020), who discovered that respondents in their research still struggle with language, sentence structure, and vocabulary as a barrier to producing acceptable scholarly writing. Tenses (M=4.21), sentence structure (M=4.18), and vocabulary (M=3.96) were among the most often mentioned language issues by respondents. Respondents in their survey reported that they were unable to explain their ideas adequately due to their restricted English grammar and vocabulary, impacting the quality and content of their writing. Furthermore, Widagdo (2017) stated that respondents in his survey continue to struggle with coherently organizing their ideas, as well as failing to produce ideas and lacking sufficient information in their writing. Furthermore, spelling errors and punctuation are the most common errors identified in his study (20.64%) and (10.30%), respectively. However, in this research, students who completed the questionnaires indicated that these mistakes were not a concern, resulting in the fact that only one student reported having spelling difficulties and none reported having punctuation difficulty.

### *The Writing Strategies Used by the Fifth-Semester Students at Tidar University to Improve their English Writing*

The writing strategy presented in this research is based on a framework developed by Kirby and Crovitz (2013), who stated that there are four writing strategies: independent writing, think-aloud, modelled writing, and guided writing strategy. According to the results of this study, up to ten students utilize the independent writing strategy, nine students use the think aloud strategy, four students use the modelled writing strategy, and two students use guided writing. According to the findings, each student uses a different strategy to improve their writing. Fareed et al. (2016) noted that the preferences of students' writing methods are influenced by a variety of aspects, including society, culture, the teaching-learning situation, and the learners themselves, all of which influence the development of writing abilities in some manner. Likewise, the findings of this research are comparable to those of Abas and

Aziz (2018), who investigated the usage of writing strategies by Indonesian EFL university students. Nonetheless, their study introduced ten writing strategies to be used by EFL university students as participants, primarily mechanics of writing, relating the topic to prior experience and knowledge, talk-writing, freewriting, outlining, listing, using online materials, seeking help, considering the reader, and text organization at each stage of the writing process. The two strategies utilized by all participants are writing mechanics and relating the topic to prior experience and knowledge, while talk-writing, freewriting, and the utilization of online materials are the least employed. The findings of their study considerably contribute to the field of knowledge on writing and have assisted L2 writers in using the proposed writing strategies.

These issues and obstacles can be addressed by remedial actions at both the institutional and individual levels. Respondents described that instructors improve students' engagement to all four skills, with a focus on reading and writing. Instructors ought to provide insightful suggestions to pupils, prevent condemnation of student work, and establish writing challenges to stimulate pupils. It is also advised that similar changes be adopted at the secondary and intermediate levels so that students encounter less issues with writing abilities in university (Fareed et al., 2016).

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

Based on the findings and discussions, the outcome of this research was to assess the writing difficulties and solutions to overcome the writing issues in students' skill in the fifth semester of the academic year 2021/2022. Grammar is the most difficult component of writing for students in this situation. Furthermore, while less so than grammar, reading and technology have an impact on writing challenges. Furthermore, this research reveals four writing strategies. There are four types of writing: independent writing, guided writing, think aloud, and modelled writing. The majority of students use independent writing to tackle their writing problems. In this case, the students use several ways to deal with writing challenges. As a result, teachers are urged to adopt an engaging and effective way to improve students' writing skills.

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