
**ESSAY WRITING COMPREHENSION AMONG 3RD SEMESTER EFL
STUDENTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

Muhammad Yasminto¹
Antoenyaz83@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aimed to explore essay writing comprehension among third-semester English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students of the English Department. A qualitative phenomenology research design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' comprehension of essay writing principles. The participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of third-semester students enrolled in an essay writing course. Data were collected through students' written essays, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to students' essay writing comprehension. The findings revealed that students demonstrated a basic understanding of the general structure of an academic essay, including the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. However, their comprehension of key aspects such as thesis statement formulation, coherence and cohesion, idea development, and effective language use was limited. Many students experienced difficulties in developing clear and focused thesis statements, organizing ideas logically, and providing sufficient supporting details. Language-related challenges, including grammatical inaccuracies and limited vocabulary, also affected the clarity and coherence of students' essays. These findings indicate a gap between students' structural awareness and their deeper conceptual understanding of essay writing. The study suggests that more focused instructional strategies emphasizing rhetorical awareness, discourse-level organization, and guided writing practice are necessary to enhance EFL students' essay writing comprehension at the tertiary level.

Keywords: *Essay Writing Comprehension; EFL Students; Academic Writing; English Department; Tertiary Education*

¹ English Department, IAI Hasanuddin Pare

A. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental skill required of university students, particularly those enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs. Among the various forms of academic writing, essay writing plays a central role in assessing students' ability to express ideas logically, critically, and coherently in written English (Hyland, 2003; Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Mastery of essay writing not only reflects students' linguistic competence but also demonstrates their understanding of rhetorical organization, argument development, and academic conventions (Hyland, 2016). For EFL learners, however, essay writing often presents considerable challenges due to limited language proficiency, insufficient exposure to academic discourse, and difficulties in organizing ideas effectively (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Brown, 2007). In the context of higher education, students of English Departments are expected to develop advanced writing skills early in their academic journey. Third-semester students, in particular, typically transition from sentence- and paragraph-level writing to full-length essays that require a clear thesis statement, coherent body paragraphs, and a well-structured conclusion. This transition demands not only writing practice but also a strong comprehension of essay structure, coherence, cohesion, and appropriate language use. Without adequate essay writing comprehension, students may struggle to produce academically acceptable texts despite having basic grammatical knowledge.

Ideally, third-semester EFL students of the English Department are expected to possess adequate essay writing comprehension as they have completed foundational writing courses in previous semesters. At this stage, students should be able to understand and apply essential components of essay writing, including constructing a clear thesis statement, organizing coherent body paragraphs, maintaining logical flow through cohesion and coherence, and using appropriate academic language. This level of comprehension is crucial to ensure students' readiness for more advanced academic writing tasks, such as argumentative essays, research reports, and final undergraduate theses.

In reality, however, preliminary observations and classroom experiences indicate that many third-semester EFL students still encounter significant difficulties in essay writing. Students often demonstrate limited understanding of essay structure, experience

challenges in developing and connecting ideas across paragraphs, and struggle with grammatical accuracy and appropriate vocabulary use. As a result, their essays tend to lack clarity, coherence, and academic rigor. These issues suggest that students' comprehension of essay writing principles may not align with the expected learning outcomes of the curriculum.

Moreover, although numerous studies have investigated EFL students' writing performance, most of them focus on the final written product rather than students' comprehension of essay writing as an underlying cognitive process. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence that specifically examines how well EFL students understand essay-writing concepts before or while producing essays, particularly at the early stages of tertiary education. This lack of focus creates a gap between the ideal expectation of students' writing competence and the actual conditions observed in EFL classrooms.

Therefore, the research gap lies in the discrepancy between the expected level of essay writing comprehension among third-semester EFL students and their actual demonstrated understanding of essay writing principles. Addressing this gap is essential to identify specific areas of weakness in students' comprehension and to inform more effective instructional strategies in essay writing courses within English Departments.

Previous studies on EFL writing have identified common problems faced by learners, such as weak thesis development, lack of coherence across paragraphs, limited vocabulary, and frequent grammatical errors (Hyland, 2003; Richards & Renandya, 2002). While many of these studies focus primarily on students' writing performance or final written products, fewer investigations have specifically examined students' comprehension of essay writing as a foundational aspect of writing competence (Hyland, 2016). In fact, comprehension of essay writing principles plays a crucial role in guiding students' planning, organization, and development of ideas during the writing process.

In many English Departments, essay writing is introduced in the early semesters as a compulsory course aimed at preparing students for more advanced academic writing tasks, including research papers and undergraduate theses. However, lecturers frequently observe that students continue to experience difficulties in organizing ideas, developing arguments, and maintaining coherence in their essays, suggesting gaps in their

comprehension of essay writing conventions (Harmer, 2004; Nunan, 2003). These classroom realities indicate a mismatch between curricular expectations and students' actual writing comprehension.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the level of essay writing comprehension among third-semester EFL students of the English Department. By examining students' understanding of essay structure, coherence, cohesion, and language use, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of EFL academic writing challenges and to offer pedagogical implications for enhancing essay-writing instruction at the tertiary level.

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenology research design to explore essay-writing comprehension among third-semester EFL students of the English Department. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' understanding, experiences, and challenges related to essay writing within a natural learning context (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The descriptive design was used to portray students' essay writing comprehension without manipulating variables, allowing the phenomenon to be examined as it naturally occurs in the classroom setting (Patton, 2015).

The study was conducted in the English Department of a university where essay writing is offered as a compulsory course in the third semester. The participants consisted of third-semester EFL students selected using purposive sampling. The selection criteria included students who were actively enrolled in the essay writing course and willing to participate in the study. A total of 17 students were involved to ensure data richness and depth, which is considered appropriate for qualitative research.

Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings. The primary data sources included students' written essays, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations.

1. Students' Written Essays

Students were asked to write an academic essay based on a given topic. The essays were analyzed to examine students' comprehension of essay writing

elements, such as thesis statements, organization of ideas, coherence, cohesion, and language use.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to explore their understanding of essay writing concepts, perceived difficulties, and learning experiences. The interviews allowed flexibility for probing deeper into students' responses while maintaining focus on the research objectives.

3. Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were carried out during essay writing sessions to capture students' engagement, instructional practices, and interactions related to essay writing comprehension. Field notes were taken to document relevant behaviors and learning processes.

The data collection process was conducted in several stages. First, permission was obtained from the department and course lecturer. Second, students were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent to participate. Third, students completed the essay writing task during regular class hours. Fourth, interviews were conducted individually and audio-recorded with participants' permission. Finally, classroom observations were carried out throughout the essay writing instruction period to provide contextual data.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved data familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development (Miles et al., 2014). Students' essays, interview transcripts, and observation notes were coded to identify recurring patterns related to essay writing comprehension. The interactive model of qualitative data analysis—comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing—was applied to ensure systematic and rigorous analysis (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation across essays, interviews, and observations. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review interview summaries. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear research procedure, while confirmability was supported through reflective notes and documentation of the analysis process.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of students' written essays, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The findings are organized into major themes that reflect students' essay writing comprehension, including understanding of essay structure, thesis statement formulation, coherence and cohesion, idea development, and language use.

1. Students' Understanding of Essay Structure

The analysis of students' essays revealed that most participants demonstrated a basic understanding of the general structure of an academic essay, consisting of an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Students were generally able to distinguish these parts in their writing. However, although the structural components were present, the organization within each section was often incomplete or inconsistent. Several essays lacked clear transitions between paragraphs, and some body paragraphs did not directly support the main idea of the essay.

Interview data confirmed that students were aware of the three-part structure of an essay but had limited understanding of the specific functions of each section. Many students viewed the essay structure as a formal requirement rather than as a means of developing logical arguments. Classroom observations also indicated that students tended to follow structural templates mechanically without fully comprehending their rhetorical purposes.

2. Comprehension of Thesis Statement and Main Ideas

The findings showed that students experienced considerable difficulty in formulating clear and focused thesis statements. While most essays contained a thesis-like sentence in the introduction, many of these statements were vague, overly broad, or not clearly arguable. In several cases, the thesis statement did not align with the content of the body paragraphs.

Interviews revealed that students often perceived thesis statements as a summary of the topic rather than as a central argument guiding the essay. As a result, their essays lacked a strong controlling idea. This limited comprehension of thesis development

affected the overall coherence of the essays, as body paragraphs were not consistently connected to a central claim.

3. Coherence and Cohesion in Essay Writing

Regarding coherence and cohesion, the findings indicated that students faced challenges in maintaining logical flow within and between paragraphs. Many essays showed weak use of cohesive devices, such as transition words and referencing expressions. Paragraphs were often presented as isolated units, resulting in abrupt shifts of ideas.

Observation data suggested that students relied heavily on sentence-level grammar rather than discourse-level organization. Although some students attempted to use connectors, these were sometimes used inaccurately or repetitively. Interviews further revealed that students were not fully aware of how coherence and cohesion contribute to the readability and clarity of an essay.

4. Development of Ideas and Supporting Details

The analysis of students' essays showed limited development of ideas. Body paragraphs frequently lacked sufficient supporting details, examples, or explanations. In many cases, students presented general statements without elaboration, which weakened the argumentative strength of their essays.

From the interviews, students reported difficulty in expanding ideas and providing relevant evidence in English. They expressed uncertainty about how much explanation was needed and how to connect examples to their main points. Classroom observations also revealed that students spent more time focusing on sentence correctness than on idea development during the writing process.

5. Language Use and Grammatical Accuracy

Language-related issues were evident in most of the essays. Common problems included grammatical errors, limited vocabulary range, inappropriate word choices, and incorrect sentence structures. These language difficulties often interfered with the clarity of ideas and hindered effective communication.

Despite these challenges, the findings also showed that students were generally aware of their linguistic limitations. Interview data indicated that students frequently translated ideas from their first language into English, which contributed to grammatical

and lexical errors. This reliance on translation affected their ability to express ideas fluently and cohesively in essay writing.

6. Students' Perceptions of Essay Writing Comprehension

The findings revealed that students perceived essay writing as one of the most challenging skills in their EFL learning experience. Many participants expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to write essays, particularly in organizing ideas and developing arguments. They emphasized the need for clearer explanations, more examples, and guided practice in essay writing courses.

Overall, the findings indicate that while third-semester EFL students possess basic knowledge of essay writing structure, their comprehension of deeper aspects such as thesis development, coherence, idea elaboration, and effective language use remains limited. These findings highlight the need for instructional strategies that go beyond formal structure and focus on enhancing students' conceptual understanding of essay writing.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore essay writing comprehension among third-semester EFL students of the English Department. The findings indicate that although students possess basic awareness of essay structure, their overall comprehension of essay writing principles remains limited, particularly in thesis development, coherence and cohesion, idea elaboration, and language use. These findings suggest a gap between students' formal knowledge of essay components and their functional understanding of how these components work together to produce effective academic writing.

The findings revealed that most students demonstrated a general understanding of the conventional structure of an academic essay, consisting of an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. This result aligns with previous studies indicating that EFL learners often acquire structural knowledge of writing through explicit instruction and textbook models (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Harmer, 2004). However, the mechanical application of this structure observed in students' essays suggests that structural awareness alone does not guarantee effective writing. As Hyland (2016) argues, writing competence requires not only knowledge of form but also understanding of rhetorical

purpose. The students' tendency to follow templates without meaningful organization indicates limited comprehension of the communicative functions of each essay component.

In terms of thesis statement comprehension, the findings show that students struggled to formulate clear, focused, and arguable thesis statements. Many students perceived the thesis statement merely as a topic indicator rather than a controlling idea guiding the essay. This result supports previous research highlighting that EFL learners often experience difficulty in argument construction and stance-taking in academic writing (Hyland, 2003). Without a strong thesis statement, students' body paragraphs lacked direction and coherence, which negatively affected the overall quality of their essays. This suggests that explicit instruction on argumentative writing and thesis formulation is essential at the early stages of tertiary education.

The challenges related to coherence and cohesion further indicate students' limited discourse-level comprehension of essay writing. Although some students attempted to use cohesive devices, their use was often inaccurate or repetitive, resulting in weak logical connections between ideas. This finding is consistent with Nunan's (2003) assertion that EFL learners tend to focus more on sentence-level accuracy than on text-level organization. The lack of awareness of how ideas should flow logically across sentences and paragraphs suggests that coherence and cohesion need to be taught as conceptual writing skills rather than as a list of linking words.

Additionally, the findings revealed that students had difficulty developing ideas and providing sufficient supporting details in their essays. Many essays contained general statements without elaboration or evidence, which weakened the argumentative strength of the writing. This result aligns with Richards and Renandya (2002), who note that EFL learners often struggle with idea expansion due to limited linguistic resources and unfamiliarity with academic discourse conventions. The students' focus on grammatical correctness over content development suggests that language limitations may constrain their ability to express complex ideas effectively.

Language use and grammatical accuracy also emerged as significant challenges affecting students' essay writing comprehension. Frequent grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, and inappropriate word choices were found to interfere with clarity and

coherence. Consistent with Brown (2007), these language-related difficulties can increase cognitive load, making it more difficult for learners to simultaneously manage idea development and language form. Moreover, students' reliance on direct translation from their first language, as revealed in interviews, further contributed to non-native-like structures and reduced textual coherence.

Students' perceptions of essay writing as a difficult and demanding skill further reinforce the complexity of writing in an EFL context. Their lack of confidence and expressed need for clearer guidance indicate that current instructional practices may not sufficiently address students' comprehension needs. As Hyland (2016) emphasizes, effective writing instruction should integrate explicit explanation, modeling, and guided practice to support learners' development of academic writing competence.

Overall, the discussion of findings suggests that third-semester EFL students' essay writing comprehension is still at a developing stage. While students are familiar with the basic format of an essay, they require deeper conceptual understanding of how ideas are structured, connected, and developed within academic writing. These findings highlight the importance of instructional approaches that emphasize rhetorical awareness, discourse-level organization, and integrated language support to enhance essay-writing comprehension at the tertiary level.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

CONCLUSION

This study investigated essay-writing comprehension among third-semester EFL students of the English Department using a qualitative approach. The findings reveal that students generally possess a basic understanding of the formal structure of an academic essay, including the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. However, their comprehension of deeper aspects of essay writing—such as thesis statement formulation, coherence and cohesion, idea development, and effective language use—remains limited. The study found that students often applied essay structures mechanically without fully understanding their rhetorical functions. Difficulties in developing clear and arguable thesis statements resulted in weak organization and lack of focus in their essays. In addition, limited comprehension of coherence and cohesion led to fragmented ideas and

ineffective paragraph connections. Language-related challenges, including grammatical inaccuracies and limited vocabulary, further hindered students' ability to express ideas clearly and develop arguments effectively.

These findings suggest a gap between curricular expectations and students' actual essay writing comprehension at the early stages of tertiary education. Therefore, it is essential for writing instruction in English Departments to move beyond formal structure and place greater emphasis on conceptual understanding, discourse-level organization, and guided practice in essay writing. Providing explicit instruction, modeling effective essays, and offering constructive feedback may help improve students' comprehension and overall writing competence.

In conclusion, enhancing essay writing comprehension among third-semester EFL students is crucial for preparing them to meet the academic writing demands of higher education. Future research is recommended to explore instructional interventions or longitudinal developments in students' essay writing comprehension to further support effective academic writing pedagogy.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several suggestions are proposed for lecturers, students, institutions, and future researchers to enhance essay writing comprehension among EFL learners.

1. Suggestions for Lecturers

Lecturers teaching essay writing courses are encouraged to place greater emphasis on developing students' conceptual understanding of essay writing rather than focusing solely on formal structure. Explicit instruction on thesis statement formulation, paragraph unity, coherence, and cohesion should be integrated into classroom practice. Providing model essays, guided writing activities, and step-by-step explanations of essay components may help students better comprehend the rhetorical purposes of academic writing. In addition, continuous and constructive feedback should be provided to support students' improvement in idea development and language use.

2. Suggestions for Students

EFL students are advised to actively engage in the writing process by practicing planning, drafting, revising, and reflecting on their writing. Students should develop awareness of essay writing principles, such as maintaining a clear thesis and supporting it with relevant ideas and examples. Reading academic texts and well-written essays can also help students internalize effective writing patterns and expand their vocabulary and grammatical competence. Furthermore, students are encouraged to seek feedback from lecturers and peers to improve their essay writing comprehension.

3. Suggestions for Institutions

Educational institutions, particularly English Departments, should support the development of students' academic writing skills by providing adequate instructional resources and writing support services. Curriculum designers are encouraged to review and align essay writing course objectives with students' actual proficiency levels and learning needs. Establishing writing centers or offering supplementary writing workshops may also contribute to improving students' essay writing comprehension and overall academic writing competence.

4. Suggestions for Future Researchers

Future researchers are recommended to conduct further studies on essay writing comprehension using different research designs, such as mixed-methods or experimental approaches, to examine the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies. Longitudinal studies may also be conducted to investigate the development of students' essay writing comprehension over time. Additionally, future research may explore other factors influencing essay writing comprehension, such as students' motivation, learning strategies, or the use of technology-assisted writing instruction.

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