

## EFL LEARNERS' STORIES IN ESSAY WRITING: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** *This qualitative research aims to explore the stories of EFL learners when writing an essay. Specifically, the research focuses on examining the problems faced by EFL learners when writing essays and their strategies for overcoming these problems. Six EFL university students from the third to eighth semesters of the English department at a private university in Surabaya participated in the research. The data were generated through interviews with the participants and analysis of their written documents. The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, while the data from the students' written tasks were classified based on errors. The data analysis revealed that finding suitable ideas and using appropriate grammar were prominent problems for EFL learners. Additionally, difficulties in organizing paragraphs cohesively and coherently were also noticeable problems. However, these problems were more prevalent among higher academic achievers rather than lower academic achievers. The research results also indicated that the learners were aware of the challenges in writing essays and, therefore, creatively sought strategies to tackle these problems. The strategies used were more personalized and suited to their individual abilities and psychological needs. The current study considers the importance of exposing EFL learners to a variety of strategies to improve their writing skills.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is often the biggest burden for EFL learners striving to excel in the globalized academic world (Mays, 2017). This is due to the complexity of academic writing, which involves multiple aspects (Mays, 2017). There are several reasons why academic writing is considered complex. Firstly, EFL learners should have a good understanding of linguistics, including spelling, word choice, and punctuation (Palanisamy & Abdul Aziz, 2021). Academic writing requires a formal tone, so the use of slang or contractions should

ideally be avoided (Pablo & Lasaten, 2018). The use of slang or contractions can potentially confuse readers and lead to different interpretations of the text (Silviyanti et al., 2022). Secondly, EFL learners should focus on planning and organizing their writing effectively. Lastly, EFL learners should incorporate relevant content and proper punctuation while ensuring that no important information is left out.

In other words, linguistic aspects remain a prominent challenge for the majority of EFL learners (Abdulkareem, 2013). They often make mistakes in tenses, prepositions, pronouns, and basic sentence structure (Fareed et al., 2016). Studies conducted by Ali Badi and Al Fadda have shown that learners struggle with coherence and cohesion in their writing. Specifically, EFL learners commonly struggle with the use of articles, punctuation, irregular verbs, singular and plural forms, consistency, verb tense, expression quality, and overall sentence structure (Mubarak, 2017). Additionally, morphology and syntax, mechanical errors, and capitalization also pose challenges for EFL learners (Alfaki, 2015).

Another prominent issue concerning the challenges of EFL learners when writing essays is that different language patterns between the first and the second language. In this context, the different patterns of Bahasa Indonesian and English language. The learners often found themselves confusing when distinguishing between spoken and written English words (Al-Badi, 2015 and Fadda, 2012) in academic writing. This problem potentially leads to misunderstanding between the readers and the writers. In short, the common problems that are often faced by EFL learners are linguistic, compiling cohesive and coherent paragraphs, and choosing the appropriate diction (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017).

In addition to the technical and mechanical aspects of the English language, another challenge for EFL learners in essay writing is linked to the psychological aspect (Rahmatunisa, 2014), specifically anxiety, self-esteem, and motivation (Yendri, 2019). The psychological aspect pertains to the scientific study of behavior and mental processes (Tahmouresi & Papi, 2021), and it relates to a person's mental state, feelings, and behavior, which ultimately determine the success of EFL learners in acquiring academic writing skills. It is recognized that factors such as insufficient time to prepare papers, low writing motivation, negative perception of writing, and writing anxiety (Suryani et al., 2015 and Toba et al., 2019) contribute to psychological problems among EFL learners in English writing. Furthermore, many participants believe that academic writing does not play a crucial role in their academic pursuits. They view it as merely a means to pass examinations and do not prioritize developing their writing skills (Salma, 2015).

Previous research has extensively examined the problems faced by EFL learners in English writing. However, further research is needed to expand on this understanding

within the Indonesian context, particularly in essay writing, and to explore the strategies employed by EFL learners from different backgrounds in English competence, gender, and level of study to mitigate these problems. To be specific, the current study aimed to answer two central questions:

1. What problems do EFL learners from different backgrounds of English competence, gender, and level of the study experience when writing essays?
2. What strategies do they use to address these problems?

To achieve these objectives, narrative analysis was used to document the problems experienced by EFL learners in essay writing. Their experiences will be documented and presented through their narrative stories and artifacts addressing issues from general to specific related to essay writing

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Writing is a complex process that allows people to communicate using symbols. Through writing, individuals can share ideas, thoughts, and feelings through written texts. In order to produce good writing, learners should understand the technical rules of writing, such as grammar, vocabulary usage, and paragraph coherence and cohesion (Inayah & Nanda, 2016). Additionally, writers should be aware of the purpose of their writing, whether it be formal or informal, as this will help guide their writing.

Academic writing is a formal type of writing that EFL learners typically encounter in school or college. As formal writing, it is advisable to avoid using slang or contractions. However, each language has its own specific rules, particularly when it comes to academic writing. For example, the use of grammar and sentence structure, as well as the appropriate vocabulary, differs between English and Bahasa Indonesia. This poses a challenge for EFL learners when it comes to academic writing. It is important to note that understanding the purpose of academic writing is of utmost importance. Common purposes of academic writing can include answering a research question, discussing a topic of common interest and presenting the writer's viewpoint, or synthesizing research conducted by others on a particular subject (Bailey, 2011).

Oshima and Hogue (2007) mention that there are two types of academic writing: paragraph writing and essay writing. Paragraph writing consists of a group of related sentences that revolve around one main idea. Paragraphs can range from a single sentence to up to ten sentences. A paragraph typically consists of a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and sometimes a concluding sentence (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Essay writing, on the other hand, is a longer piece of writing that comprises multiple paragraphs and

discusses a specific topic or issue (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). They classify essays into two types: formal essays and informal essays. Formal essays are designed to inform readers about an idea and persuade them to accept a particular point of view. Informal essays, on the other hand, are meant to share the writer's personal feelings, thoughts, or experiences.

However, both types of essays should have a clear goal and a logical arrangement of supporting details (Connelly, 2013). To organize essay writing, there are three parts that must be remembered: introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. The introduction is written to stimulate readers' interest in the essay topic. It includes general statements and a thesis statement. The general statement provides background information on the topic, moving from a general idea to a specific idea. The thesis statement introduces and states the main idea of the essay, along with its subdivisions. The body paragraphs consist of one or more paragraphs, each discussing topic sentences and supporting sentences. These supporting sentences can include detailed facts, observations, personal experiences, statistics, and quotations. The conclusion paragraph is used to signal the end of the essay, summarize the main points, and convey the writer's final thoughts to readers. The goal of essay writing is to state the intent of the essay in the introduction, support it in the body, and summarize everything in the conclusion. Essay writing can be categorized into various types, such as descriptive essay, narrative essay, persuasive essay, and argumentative essay (Oshima & Hogue, 2007).

In the context of EFL learners, an essay is a piece of writing consisting of several paragraphs that discuss a single topic. However, the topic of an essay is often too complex to be confined to one long paragraph. Therefore, writers must connect these separate paragraphs by including an introduction and a conclusion (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Furthermore, learners may find it helpful to start their writing process by brainstorming ideas (Morgan, 2016).

Despite the availability of numerous resources on academic writing, EFL learners still encounter challenges in essay writing. Suhaimah investigated the most common challenges faced by EFL learners, including personal problems like lack of interest in essay writing, low self-confidence, anxiety, and motivation to write. These personal challenges can significantly impact cognitive and linguistic problems. When writers lack confidence and motivation, they struggle with drafting and revising their writing. Linguistic problems can be related to grammar, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Bulqiyah et al., 2021). These issues are prevalent among EFL learners, as each language has its own unique rules and structures.

## **METHOD**

This study is a qualitative case study that focuses on a specific system or unit of study. The researchers conduct in-depth analysis and collect data using various methods over a continuous period. The data is primarily obtained through personal interviews and documentation tasks.

The data collected consists of personal stories from six participants. Four female and two male students from the English language education department of a private university in Surabaya were involved in the research. The participants were chosen based on their competence, level of study, and gender. Specifically, the researchers focused on participants who had already passed the subject of essay writing and were in the fourth to eighth semesters.

To provide more details about the participants, the following are their profiles. There are two participants based on their English competence: Ama and Puput. Ama is considered a higher achiever, while Puput is categorized as a lower achiever. Both are in their fourth semester. The categorization of students as either higher or lower achievers was primarily based on the results of the Intensive Course subject during their first year of study. The second categorization is based solely on gender, for which Aan and Atul were selected. They are both in the sixth semester. The third categorization is based on the level of study, and for this, Iky and Lia from the eighth semester were chosen.

The interviews were conducted in a classroom at the university. The second author interviewed two participants, while the co-researcher, an eighth-semester student, interviewed the remaining participants. During the interviews, the participants were also asked to provide examples of their writing. The written data (examples of the participants' writing) collected from the participants was used to cross-check the information obtained from the interviews.

After transcribing the interviews, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The transcribed data was systematically read and re-read, labeled, and categorized based on themes that emerged during the process, ranging from common problems to specific ones. The presentation of the data follows these categorized themes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The results of the present study show that three prominent problems emerged from the data analysis. The presentation follows the themes that emerged, moving from general problems to specific ones: 1) The problems of selecting, translating, and realizing ideas in

sentences; 2) The problems of using appropriate tenses and modals; and 3) The problem of organizing paragraphs. Additionally, there are two prominent strategies to overcome these major challenges: 1) Watching news on TV and YouTube; and 2) Reading articles and English books

## **EFL Learners' Problems in Essay Writing**

### **1) The Problems of Selecting, Translating and Realizing Ideas into sentences**

The data analysis of this study shows that finding suitable ideas in essay writing is the most prominent problem faced by the participants, regardless of their competence, gender, and level of study. This problem includes deciding on the most relevant ideas and how to develop them into more complex sentences in an essay. One participant, named Puput, for example, experienced mixed feelings when deciding on a topic to write about.

#### ***Extract 1.1***

Puput: *"before writing an essay, it is required to determine the theme and topic to be written. It was very hard for me and confused about what should I write in my essay"*

A deficit of knowledge about a variety of issues may be the determining factor for the participant not knowing how to select the most relevant topic in essay writing. When the participant was asked how often she invests time in reading written sources, whether printed or online, she replied, 'Sometimes, but I always read statuses on Facebook.' This indicates an intimate relationship between knowledge and the ability to translate ideas into the required tasks. In other words, reading and writing are two sides of the same coin, which are inextricably linked.

In addition, writing the steps of an essay was also the most challenging for EFL learners. In this sense, EFL learners had to translate the information that emerged in their thoughts into words, meaning they were often confused about how to express their ideas in essays. One participant, named Ana, said that transferring information from her thoughts to words was her main challenge when writing essays. This also applies to Aan, who admitted that connecting ideas in written form is difficult.

#### ***Extract 1.2***

Aan: *"Constructing the ideas into my own words is my challenge when writing essays. It includes how to start to write. Which ideas should be put first and which other ideas should be put afterwards?"*

The difficulty of articulating ideas into sentences and rearranging them into coherent structures is accentuated by his inability to develop complete sentences. He showed one of

his documents, which indicated his struggle to meet the minimum requirements of the essay. His biggest problem was articulating his ideas in written form.

Aan's situation is similar to that of Iky in that she found it difficult to meet the minimum requirement of writing 500 words. She stated that developing sentences into longer paragraphs was quite challenging. In other words, there was a mismatch between her thoughts and her ability to express them in writing.

However, when asked detailed questions in the interview, one participant, Puput, admitted that a lack of training and writing habits are concrete problems. She acknowledged that her lack of intensive training in writing leads to confusion, which impacts her ability to meet the minimum writing length. In addition, Puput also noted that her inability to recognize sentences or phrases exacerbates her problems in essay writing.

**Extract 1.3**

Puput: *"I remember that a sentence has a subject and that is my difficulty. I am difficult to know whether it is a sentence or phrase. I know that a sentence should consist of subject, verb, object, and adverb, but when it is long sentences, I fail.*

Similar to Puput, technical problems such as failure of identifying either a sentence or a phrase and simple, compound, or complex sentences is a major problem for Atul.

**Extract 1.4**

Atul: *"In essay writing, I had difficulty translating my ideas into my own words. I got confused about how to arrange a sentence correctly and well. Should I write in simple, compound, or complex sentences?"*

However, not all participants experienced the same situation. Ama, for example, did not consider recognizing sentences or phrases to be a primary burden when writing an essay. Instead, she found it challenging to rearrange sentences into solid and cohesive ideas, making it easier for herself and her readers to understand the points of her essays. When Ama was asked about the problems she faced during essay writing, she answered...:

**Extract 1.5**

Ama: *"Firstly, it is easy to find an idea and write it down into sentences, but it becomes difficult when coming to an end which must have five hundred words as the rule of the essay. I got difficulty to arrange my sentences into good paragraphs."*

From the data analysis presented, it is evident that technical problems are likely the major challenges faced by the participants, regardless of their categories. The following section addresses another technical problem: the difficulty of using appropriate tenses and correct modals.

## **2) The Problems of Using appropriate Tenses and Modals.**

The data analysis of this study showed that grammatical errors are quite frequently enacted by the participants during the interviews and documents analysis. These errors can be linked to their uses of inappropriate tenses in writing. From the feedback provided by their lecturer, inappropriate tenses in writing are perceived by the participants to be the second biggest burden to write good essays.

Puput, for example, mentioned that she used different tenses in a paragraph, employing the simple past in the first sentence and the simple present in the subsequent sentences. She reflectively noted that using different tenses in a paragraph can potentially confuse readers about whether it is a past or present story. Additionally, the use of verbs in different tenses is also confusing for the participants. In that sense, they often forget to change the verb forms when switching tenses.

### ***Extract 2.1***

*Aan: "My challenge is how to use suitable tenses. I am confused about writing an essay with a past topic. Sometimes I forgot to change my verb into past simple. all in all, considering whether using simple past or perfect tense really confuses me."*

Many different tenses and the varied usage of modal auxiliaries are the principal factors preventing participants from acquiring and using them in real contexts. For example, Iky illustrated that the complexity of tenses is a key element contributing to her inability to use the correct tenses in essay writing.

### ***Extract 2.2***

*Iky: "I am confused whether this sentence uses simple past or past continuous. This happens because of too many tenses that I must understand, sixteen tenses. ...Another difficulty is modal auxiliary, such as would, could and the way to use it."*

The complex problems in academic writing for EFL learners are not only centered on tenses but are also closely linked to sentence structures and whether these structures adhere to the academic rules of the target language. For example, participants often struggle to determine whether their sentences are complete. After receiving feedback from their lecturer, the participants eventually realized that much of what they had written consisted of incomplete sentences. Puput provided an example of an incomplete thought, such as 'I like to visit,' and understood that this sentence should be completed by adding a complement, like 'visit where? '.

Apart from the problem of making complete sentences, participants also pointed out that active and passive forms are confusing to implement in writing. More specifically, the



use of modal auxiliaries—whether they should be followed by the infinitive or the 'to' infinitive—presents a noticeable problem.

The aforementioned problems of essay writing—the grammatical, structural, and psychological issues experienced by EFL learners—indicate that the challenges of academic writing for EFL learners in this context are quite complex. Additionally, the technical problems associated with organizing paragraphs and constructing coherent and cohesive writing are likely even more complex.

### **3). The Problem of Organizing Paragraphs**

The data sets illustrate that organizing paragraphs was another major challenge faced by the participants. In this context, organizing paragraphs refers to the way sentences are combined and structured to create coherence and cohesion in essay writing. The main features that writers should pay attention to in order to organize paragraphs coherently and cohesively include the use of topic and supporting sentences, such as facts, examples, and reasons. Unfortunately, the issues surrounding the topic and supporting sentences remain a serious problem for the participants.

Ama experienced difficulty in organizing paragraphs that were not quite relevant to one another. For example, she explained that she had once written about a topic that had no relation to her essay's main theme. Initially, she was excited to express her ideas and felt she could meet the required minimum length of the essay. However, she eventually became aware of her mistakes after reading her essay multiple times, from the first to the last paragraph.

#### ***Extract 3.1***

*Ama; "At that time, I was so excited to write an essay. I could write quite a long essay. But then I realized I was losing my topic. It is like jumping over. It is difficult to stick to a topic in my essay writing."*

The difficulty Ama faced in sticking to one topic may be related to her challenges with using transitional verbs. In this context, Ama might not fully understand the meaning of each transitional word, or she may struggle with recognizing the different topics of discussion in each paragraph. As a result, she finds it difficult to choose the most relevant transitional words to link her paragraphs effectively.

#### ***Extract 3.2***

*Ama: "transitional words, it is difficult for me to bring the readers to understand my transitional words. I don't know, but I think the (different) topic of discussion on each paragraph makes me confused to link them."*

In relation to Ama's experience, Aan and Atul share similar issues with transitional words in essay writing. Although they have been trained to use transitional words during classes and exercises, they still feel confused during independent exercises. According to them, the point the lecturer always emphasizes in class is to remember the previous sentence(s) before writing the following sentence(s), yet they still struggle to apply this advice in practice

**Extract 3.3**

Aan: *"I myself get confused when linking one paragraph to others. My lecturer has ever taught me about transitional words and gave me the clue that the next sentence must relate to the previous sentence."*

The inability to use the most appropriate transitional words may be influenced by the initial processes before writing an essay. The participants might have forgotten to create a mind map before starting their essays. Atul explicitly mentioned this problem during the interview.

**Extract 3.4**

Atul: *"sometimes I could not get the point of my essay. It causes my paragraphs to have no relation to each other. I feel my essay is untidy and out of the topic. This is caused by writing an essay with no mind map first."*

The issue of mind mapping and its relation to the inability to use appropriate transitional words is emphasized by Lia, a senior student. According to Lia, when students are familiar with mind mapping before starting to write, the misuse of transitional words can be reduced. Based on her experience writing essays during her coursework, she suggested that mind mapping plays a crucial role in the success of writing in general. She illustrated that, after receiving frequent feedback on her writing from her lecturers, she ultimately concluded that mind mapping is essential for beginners like her.

**Extract 3.5**

Lia: *"I had writing classes and now I am writing a thesis, I got a precious experience of writing. My lecturers and my supervisor always corrected my writing. They often paid attention to the connection between sentences and paragraphs. Are they connected or not...mind mapping as they suggested works well."*

However, the biggest problem Lia faces in writing essays is using suitable and varied vocabulary. The words she employs tend to be limited and sound quite common. She sometimes wonders how others can write essays using sophisticated vocabulary without making major mistakes. When she was asked how she reflects on her essay writing, she said that...

**Extract 3.6**

Lia: *“my vocabularies are like so so. I actually want to use high vocabulary in my essays, but I can’t. I have very limited vocabulary. I get jealous when reading essays which have a lot of high vocabularies. It is cool”*

It can be noted that the challenges participants face in their essay writing vary based on their level of study and competence. Although they each have their own problems with essay writing, they actively seek suitable strategies to address these issues.

**4). EFL Learners’ Strategy to Overcome the challenges**

This study indicates that participants use different strategies to address their essay writing problems. Their strategies range from watching YouTube and TV to consulting dictionaries and reading English news, articles, and books. Accessing these diverse sources provides various solutions for the participants. For example, Puput mentioned that watching international news on TV could inspire her to write an essay. She illustrated that when she gets stuck on one topic, watching the news can help her think of other topics.

**Extract 4.1**

Puput: *“I will learn from watching films or TV. Because my hobby is watching, not reading. If I don’t have ideas to write, I usually watch news on TV like Metro TV.”*

Her preference for watching news on TV over reading English books or articles is deeply influenced by psychological and academic factors, as she does not enjoy reading and finds it confusing. While watching news and films is Puput’s preference, reading English books and articles is perceived to be the best strategy to help reduce and overcome Aan’s problems in essay writing. He metaphorically stated that a good writer comes from being a good reader. In this sense, to be able to write, he believes one should read first.

**Extract 4.2**

Aan: *“I focus on reading. A good writer comes from a good reader is a statement that I always remember. I often read my notes to overcome my grammar problem, while reading articles to help me get new ideas.”*

Although Aan was fully aware that reading can help reduce technical writing problems, he did not invest time in reading regularly. When asked about his competence in English essay writing, he shyly admitted that his writing skills had improved. While his writing skills have not significantly improved, he believes that reading can help address the challenges in essay writing. This sentiment is echoed by Ama, who feels that reading is an effective way to help reduce her writing deficiencies.

**Extract 4.3**

Ama: *“Reading, reading English news, books and articles can teach me how to use grammar and structure in the sentences and I can get new inspiration to write essays with ideas. Besides, reading can enrich my vocabulary competence.”*

According to Ama, reading can be likened to a double-edged sword, meaning one activity can have multiple impacts. Reading can help improve her knowledge of grammar and structure, enrich her vocabulary, and serve as a source of information for writing.

Similar to Ama’s strategy, Atul likes to read and consult dictionaries. She uses this strategy when her friends are absent and she needs assistance. Additionally, she utilizes Google Translate when she doesn’t know the English terms while writing. In this case, she writes in Indonesian first and then translates it into English.

**Extract 4.4**

Atul: *“my strategy is reading an oxford dictionary. I will read my essay again to check my essay writing. My way to write an essay is writing in Indonesia first then translated into English via google translate.”*

Regarding the use of Google Translate, Lia tries to avoid it. She is concerned that relying too much on translation can jeopardize her thinking and creativity. Lia illustrated that when the brain is not trained to think critically, it can become stuck. As she asserted, using Google Translate can lead to 'bad habits.' Instead, she uses applications like U-Dictionary to help improve her writing skills. Lia also agrees that, rather than relying on applications, reading can have a concrete impact on improving writing skills; however, she did not elaborate on her experiences of enhancing her writing through intensive reading.

Unlike Lia, Iky has a strong confidence that reading, particularly English articles, can serve as a valuable reference for writing essays. In other words, reading articles can be a source of inspiration and can also teach her how to write in English naturally, like native speakers do. She recalled that when she was asked to write an essay in her Writing 3 course, she rewrote some sentences from her reading activities in her essay, which impressed her lecturers.

**Extract 4.5**

Iky: *“My lecturer was very happy to read my essay. He commented that some of my essay writing looks like native speakers do”*

Iky then explained that having a good mood is another important aspect of reading articles effectively. In this sense, being in a good mood while reading helps her remember patterns and sentences. A positive mood and good memory are intertwined; having a strong memory of the patterns and sentences from the articles can be very useful in essay writing.

Recalling this memory and transferring it into her essays helps her cope with the challenges in her writing.

## **DISCUSSION**

This section aims to discuss the three key findings of the current study in respect to the problems of EFL learners on essay writing and the strategies they used to help overcome the problems. They are 1). The problems of selecting, translating and realizing ideas into sentences 2). The Problems of Using appropriate Tenses and Modals. 3). The problem of organizing paragraphs. Whilst there are two perceived effective strategies to help reduce the problems namely 1). Watching news on TV and YouTube. 2). Reading articles and English books.

The first finding is concern with the problem of selecting, translating, and realizing ideas into sentences. All participants asserted that the cognitive aspect plays the crucial role in the major problem of essay writing. They articulated that picking up the most suitable topic for essay writing becomes the first identified problem before the participants can proceed to writing. As the fundamental step, this cognitive process requires stocks of knowledge and one of the strategies to help enrich knowledge is by watching news on TV and YouTube. By watching news on TV and YouTube, the participants can generate more ideas to think of. This finding corroborates the literature study conducted by Rahmanita (2023) which notes that the problems of EFL in English writing can be categorized into three categories, pre-writing, whilst writing and post writing and the finding of the current study fits with the first category in that students do not have sufficient ideas to write and the result they do not know how to write. Moreover, this current study finding is also linear with the previous study which concern with the problems of the 3rd EFL students in essay writing in that gathering ideas is the most effort step for students to pass (Bisriyah, 2022)

In addition, the second identified problem faced by EFL learners in this study is closely related to the inappropriate use of tenses and modals in writing. This finding confirms previous studies, which indicate that the majority of first-year EFL students find faulty sentences to be the most difficult problem in essay writing (60,41%), while grammatical errors make up to 16,88%, and mechanics errors consists of 13,1% errors (Alfaruqy et al., 2022). In addition, the result of the current study corroborates the study conducted by Ariyanti & Fitriana (2017) which claims that the use of tenses in English writing is the most prominent problem for EFL learners. Fitria's (2022) study which focuses on analyzing students' problems in academic writing (thesis) across universities in Indonesia argues that English grammar and choosing the right vocabulary are among the noticeable problems

faced by EFL learners. Based on her study, the error of grammatical aspect was only 23.2%. This result is slightly lower compared to Rahmatunisa's study (2014) which reported that 30.2% of errors that EFL students make is on grammatical aspects. The finding of the current study also supports the previous study which indicates that difficulties of using grammar (Aminah & Supriadi, 2023), developing main ideas and meeting the coherence and cohesiveness are the factors of students' problems in English writing (Wirantaka, 2016). Concerning the issue of coherence and cohesive, Al-Badi (2015) also found that EFL learners faced difficulties in constructing ideas into writing so that they did not meet the requirement of coherence and cohesive paragraphs.

In addition, the concepts of coherence and cohesion are closely associated with the third problem raised in this study, which is that the students lack a solid understanding of how to organize paragraphs. The participants asserted that they have different technical problems in organizing paragraphs, ranging from the use of transitional words to selecting the most appropriate and sophisticated vocabulary. This finding aligns with previous studies, which indicate that the second biggest difficulty faced by EFL learners is the organization of writing and limited vocabulary (Riadil et al., 2023). In addition, previous study also reported that word choices are a significant factor of EFL learners unable to write a good paragraph (Wirantaka's study, 2016). However, this current study shows that higher academic achievers find that using lexical density is difficult in writing.

Although previous studies have identified common problems in English writing among EFL learners, they did not explore the underlying factors behind these problems. Earlier research has specifically pinpointed the issues faced by EFL students in essay writing related to coherence and cohesion (Belkhier & Benyelles, 2017; Faradhibah & Nur, 2017) and conclude that lack of reading and insufficient writing practices are the major contributing factors to EFL students' difficulties in essay writing. Hapsari et al. (2022) also found that a lack of writing practice is the principal factor contributing to the problems of English writing among EFL learners. Regarding coherence and cohesion in writing, this current study shows that these issues are articulated only by participants categorized as senior and high academic achievers. This suggests that issues of coherence and cohesion are likely experienced by higher academic achievers, rather than by lower academic achievers or those in earlier semesters. In other words, lower academic achievers are still struggling with basic writing problems, which may explain why they did not raise these issues. In other words, they have not yet grasped the concepts of coherence and cohesion. This finding is in agreement with the previous study which examines senior high school students' perception regarding their difficulties in English writing (Adelita et al., 2023). The findings of the study

show that the problems are around the sentence faults and grammatical errors (Alfaruqy et al., 2022) and not beyond the technical problem such as the issue of coherence and cohesion.

In addition, the findings of the current study show that participants use a variety of personalized strategies, including watching news on TV, viewing YouTube videos, using Google Translate, and reading English articles and books. The findings of the current study align with those of a previous study conducted by Salma (2015) which shows that reading books, magazines, and papers intensively helps improve writing skills. Additionally, Riadil et al. (2023) summarize that personalized strategies are reported to be the most effective for EFL learners. It means that each participant tends to have his own strategy and his strategy differs from one participant to other participants. Some participants inclined to use independent writing strategy, some other use think aloud, modeled and guided writing. In addition, this study implicitly shows that there are two common sources that EFL learners use to help reduce their problems in essay writing: popular sources of entertainment and more academic sources.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study suggests that EFL learners of different academic abilities and levels face a variety of challenges in essay writing. However, they tend to face similar problems, including difficulty in selecting, translating, and expressing ideas in sentences, using appropriate verb tenses and modals, and organizing paragraphs. Although they share these common challenges, the participants categorized as higher achievers encounter additional difficulties related to lexical density, as well as cohesiveness and coherence. Regarding the strategies the participants used to address their essay writing challenges, they employed various personalized strategies that suited their individual abilities and psychological needs. Some relied on more popular sources of entertainment, while others leaned towards more academic sources. These findings indicate that the problems faced by participants are similar to those experienced by other EFL learners, and that technical writing issues remain prevalent. Future research should examine the broader context and specific challenges faced by different groups and classes in Indonesia to gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the difficulties Indonesian EFL learners encounter in English writing.

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