

STUDENTS' ATTITUDE AND DIFFICULTIES ON ONLINE ESSAY WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Online essay writing has become a convenient alternative for teacher to teach academic writing to students ever since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the beginning of 2020. Even so, online essay writing can differ from the conventional essay writing in many aspects. Regardless, writing is still considered as one of the most difficult skill to master for students. This study aimed to describe students' attitude towards online essay writing, especially for academic purpose, and to describe the difficulty the students faced in online essay writing. The study used qualitative method as the research design and interview as the instrument in collecting the data. The participants in this study included three different students in the fourth semester English Education Program in Muhammadiyah University of Jember. The data was analyzed descriptively according to analysis technique by Miles and Huberman and validated through data source triangulation. The result of the study showed that all students demonstrated positive attitude towards online essay writing. Regarding the difficulty, similar pattern of challenge in writing shared among three participants including but are not limited to grammatical rules, vocabulary, technical problems, and linguistic problems, such as delivering meanings and text structure.

Key Words: Online Essay Writing, Students' Attitude, Writing Difficulty

INTRODUCTION

Essay writing is one of the competency targets in writing learning. Students were asked to understand several types of writing to determine the writing method to be used. In addition, writing essays could also help students practice critical thinking skills, which would be very useful in students' work and social life in the future. Therefore, a study conducted by Preiss, Castillo,

Gregorenko, and Manzi (2013, p.7) found that compared to math skills, writing was a significant predictor of university achievement. In the study, they also investigated the relationship between students' writing attitudes and their writing achievement. However, writing is also the most difficult skill for students face. Previous research had shown several factors that cause students to have a negative attitude toward writing, namely the lack of time to practice in class and ineffective writing

course guides and resources for critical writing (Ismail, Hussin, and Darus, 2012, p. 1093).

For this reason, it is necessary to have a learning model that is able to provide a good understanding to students. But of course, this is a new challenge, especially for students who were experiencing a transitional learning period from face-to-face learning to online learning that has occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Online-based learning was a step taken by every educational institution in the world to facilitate students to carry out learning activities amid this pandemic.

Another advantage of online-based learning is that it greatly facilitated students to create learning situations where they presented flexible, effective, and interactive learning with a variety of attractive electronic visual media so that this learning is more impactful. The ease of use of this mobile-based learning makes it easier for students to control how their learning model, whenever, and wherever they want. And also made it easier for students to access the information they need at that time, from anywhere.

The drawbacks of the online learning model are learning time is limited unlike it is during offline learning, internet network constraints and internet quota costs experienced

by students and educators, as well as boredom in learning because the material presented by the teacher was sometimes only as reading material and questions without a direct explanation from the teacher concerned, the lack of supervision from teachers and parents also makes it easier for students to neglect their learning because students' concentration is distracted by other things (Nengrum, Pettasolong, and Nuriman, 2021, p. 8-10).

In the case of understanding essay writing, it is necessary to use online learning tools that can build students' attitudes, interests, and abilities in improving and dealing with the existing difficulties in the process of improving their writing skills. A previous study conducted by (Ismail, Hussin, & Darus, 2012, p. 1093-1099) showed that teachers perceive that most students had negative attitudes toward writing as a result of procrastinating their writing work. Students are also indicated to be careless and did not like to write. The findings of the students also revealed that they found writing in English difficult and they did not like it. This is felt because of the lack of time allocation for practice in class, boring writing activities, and the lack of emphasis on critical thinking in their writing courses. Furthermore, they suggested that special online writing programs be improved to be more attractive so that they could act as a supplement to the course and helped improve students' writing skills and interests.

Other studies about student attitudes

toward online writing were presented by (Setyowati and Sukmawan, 2016, p. 368), who explained that as many as 52.63 % of students had a moderate attitude towards writing, and the rest had a positive attitude toward writing activities. However, despite their moderate attitude, students still think that writing is a strenuous activity and had high pressure. Meanwhile, students who have a high attitude towards writing thought this task was attractive and challenging.

Therefore, this study objectives will discuss further if there are the students' attitude regarding writing especially for academic purposes and the difficulties the students from semester 4th English Education Program in Muhammadiyah University of Jember face in learning to write in online essay writing.

The outcome of this research might be used as the reference for those who want to conduct research in online writing class. The research findings are expected to make a positive contribution to provide benefits in English writing class to simulate student needs and interests and insert positive perceptions.

METHOD

This research used qualitative method. The data were the statements students' attitude and difficulties which were taken from interview transcript. In this study, the source of the

data was 3 university students majoring English Education Program who are currently in the fourth semester of their study. The consideration taken in choosing the three participants in this study was based three characteristics: First, students must study in English major at Muhammadiyah University of Jember. Second, students must have experienced online writing class during the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, the numbers of participants in this study was determined based on the principle of data source triangulation which needs three different sources in validating reliability of the result in qualitative study.

The instrument was used interview. This study adapted instrument items that had been validated from the previous relevant study. The first 5 questions in the interview guidelines were adapted from Jabali (2018, p.9-10) which administered to answer the first research question in this study about students' attitudes towards online essay writing. The rest 5 questions in the interview focused more on the difficulty students' face during online essay writing. That way, the ten items in the interview were capable to answer two research question proposed in this study.

After collecting the data, the data analysis processed using the data analysis model of Miles and Huberman (Sugiyono, 2013, p. 246). Activities in data analysis are data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/ verification.

The research was validated by using triangulation. There are 3 classifications of

triangulation as checking data from various sources in various ways, and at various times. Those classifications are source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation (Sugiyono, 2013, p. 274). Hence, this study used data source triangulation where the study had three different participants as data source whose answers were used to prove the reliability of the result in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In completing this research, the results were obtained from the three participants (P1, P2, and P3) who were 4th semester students of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education English Language Education Program. The three participants conducted an online video call interview using the ZOOM application. This online interview contains ten questions divided into two sections: 5 questions about students' attitudes toward online academic essay writing and 5 questions about the students' difficulties in writing essays online. The online interview, which was conducted from 26th to 28th June 2022, used Indonesian for the convenience of the participants. The following data were obtained is presented below:

Students' Attitude towards Online Academic Essay Writing

Based on the online interviews that have been conducted with three participants, the results are listed

in the following table:

Table 1. Students' attitudes toward online academic essay writing statements

Statement	Agr eed	Disa- greed
Writing skills, including academic writing, are an important skill to master by students.	✓	
Online essay writing is easier compared to offline essay writing.	✓	
The students obtain many things about essay writing from the online class.	✓	
The students feel comfortable and confident in online essay writing	✓	
The students like online essay writing	✓	

Based on the table above, it can be noticed that all participants show positive attitudes toward online academic essay writing. The data listed in the table above will be described in more detail below.

All participants agreed that writing skills, including academic writing, are essential to master. Since it has become a fundamental skill that everyone should master, academic writing also helps them to do their daily routines (filling out forms to writing letters), complete their study (getting good GPA scores), and their future career as English teachers.

Towards this, the three participants also agreed that online essay writing is easy compared to offline essay writing, although there might be a situation where online essay writing can also be challenging for them. The three participants agreed that by

doing online essay writing, they could discover more references to improve their essay's contents. The participants admitted that by doing online essay writing, they could discover more preferences through the internet, resources, or even ask the lecturers and peers about the topics.

Obviously, in the third question, the three participants agreed they had learned many things about essay writing from their online class. Since the class is held online, the P1 can find more references related to essay writing from many resources, including Google, which later s/he asked her/his lecturers more profoundly. Meanwhile, P2 and P3 admitted that the online class helps them deal with the grammar and materials, which is considered the biggest problem in essay writing. The P2 and P3 also admitted that in the online class, the lecturers always shared their documents or materials, which helped the students to study it by themselves, and also assisted and gave feedback on their study performances.

The three participants also showed that they feel comfortable and confident in online essay writing, primarily related to their study atmosphere. Since the online class can be joined from their room or even other places, the environment they can control. This situation helps the students

feel more comfortable and less anxious, which also helps them create good essay writing.

In conclusion, the three participants admitted that they like online essay writing even if it is challenging. However, online essay writing has become essential to master in the digital era, which also helps them to do their daily routines, obtain a good GPA score, and in their future careers. Through the online essay writing, the participants felt more comfortable and confident in their writing which also resulted in good essay writing.

Students' Difficulties in Writing Essays Online

Regardless of the positive attitudes that the participants presented in the first half of the interview, they admitted that they also experienced numerous difficulties in writing essays online. The first difficulties are related to the grammatical rules, vocabulary, technical problems, and linguistic problems, such as delivering meanings and text structure. The participants admitted that their English essay did not result in an authentic English essay since they had difficulty appropriately applying the structure, grammatical rules, and vocabulary. Moreover, P1 and P2 considered that vocabulary became their most significant issue in creating good essay writing since they cannot differentiate the suitable vocabulary. In addition, P3 added that the types of essays and their characteristics also become the problem since each text has slightly similar structures.

These difficulties experienced by the participants can result from the lack of lecturers' assistance, such as lack of explanations about the material and lack of additional learning resources. However, these difficulties are also caused by the participants who lack interest in learning. To overcome the difficulties, two participants admitted to discovering more online learning resources while a participant was trying to improve his/her interest in learning. Related to this, Google as the search engine is beneficial in helping the participants discover supporting learning resources and the method to improve their learning habits.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion that can be drawn from this study that all students showed positive interest in online essay writing as well as perceiving writing skills as important for both their study and future career. The students also mentioned that they perceived online essay writing as an easy task instead of a difficult one. All students also agreed that they learned many things about essay writing from their online class. Primarily, the students learned the material better since their lecturers are more approachable during online learning. The students also admitted that they feel comfortable and confident in online essay writing since they can control and choose the place

where they want to study. Accordingly, all students demonstrated a positive interest in online essay writing.

However, regardless of the students' positive attitudes in the first half of the interview, they admitted that they also experienced numerous difficulties in writing essays online. There was a similar pattern among the answers given by the participants. The difficulties experienced by the students in writing essays online are primarily related to the grammatical rules, vocabulary, technical problems, and linguistic problems, such as delivering meanings and text structure. In addition, the students emphasized that their difficulties were caused by the lack of assistance from the lecturers. It also led the students to depend more on the internet to overcome their problems than their lecturers.

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