❒   720

A needs analysis on challenges in English expository writing among English as a second language learners

Noorfatin Zakaria, Nur Ainil Sulaiman

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Effective communication in English, particularly in writing, is becoming increasingly important globally. Despite being exposed to all four language skills, English as a second language (ESL) learners regularly perceive writing to be the most difficult element. This stance is held by both the English education system and ESL students in Malaysia, highlighting the importance of writing as an important language skill that is difficult to acquire. With expository writing is seen to be the least researched genre, this research seeks to fill this gap by examining the challenges ESL learners face in writing expository essays to provide potential classroom solution to improve their writing skill in this genre. A questionnaire was administered to 68 Form Four ESL learners as part of this study to gather essential data. The collected data underwent analysis using descriptive statistics with the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS Ver. 27). The results were then presented in frequencies, percentages and the overall mean score. The findings revealed that respondents are still struggling with content development and organization as well as the writing process. Therefore, adding more interactive and student-centered learning approaches to ESL writing lessons could help students' writing skills.

Corresponding Author:

Nur Ainil Sulaiman
Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Lingkungan Ilmu, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: nurainil@ukm.edu.my

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized society, the ability to communicate effectively in English—especially in writing—has become more crucial. The emphasis on writing skills is an indicator of excellent communication and is necessary for the sharing of knowledge [1]. In particular, exposition is critical in assisting English as a second language (ESL) learners to understand complex topics and keep up with current events, as it is served as a bridge to overall learning and language achievement [2]. This, in turn, leads to greater professional success, which reflects learners' excellent communication and cognitive processes that foster critical and reflective thinking, both of which are vital in their career development and personal growth [3], [4]. This awareness derives from employers, who now acknowledge the value of English language and communication skills, including both written and spoken abilities, in the workplace [5]. Furthermore, because writing promotes the development of critical thinking in ESL learners, it enables learners to clarify their ideas logically [6]. ESL students frequently identify writing as the most difficult task even if they have been exposed to four language skills in school [7], as the process is perceived as frightening, especially for those who lack confidence in their ability to utilize English [8].

The English education system and ESL students in Malaysia both view writing as a critical language skill that is challenging to develop, especially when writing expository articles [1], [9]. Among the elements

that contributed to this problem include traditional approaches to writing instruction [10] and an overemphasis on a product-based approach. As a result, ESL students were overly reliant on their teachers as a result. This resulted in boring English language instruction that hinders the growth of writing techniques [10], as well as the capacity to communicate effectively and build higher-order thinking abilities [11]. Significantly, these have prevented them from using English in their daily lives and have demotivated them [12]. Furthermore, challenging course content, writing anxiety and difficulty creating error-free writing have all contributed to disorganized writing among ESL students [13].

Overall, these problems have discouraged learners from enhancing their writing skills and highlighted the need for greater expository writing education. Because it is a writing that seeks to clarify, enlighten, and depict a problem in an organized and intelligible manner, it is essential not just for language competency but also for critical thinking and successful communication [14], [15]. Despite having been exposed to a wealth of studies on the obstacles faced by ESL learners in acquiring English writing utilizing various composition genres, the direct use of exposition, in particular, remained limited [16]. As language skills are divided into two areas in education: receptive skills and productive skills [17], writing is regarded as one of the productive abilities, that is essential for efficient communication [18]. In order to become proficient writers, ESL learners need to be able to blend basic and advanced writing strategies. The former involves using the appropriate writing genre, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and punctuation [19], [20], whereas the latter includes advanced abilities such as concept integration, proper language structure, and efficient information presentation [21]–[23]. For ESL learners to succeed in written communication, they must possess this dual competence.

To write well-structured exposition essays, ESL students will have to concentrate on developing their reading comprehension, which facilitates the creation of expository texts. This will help them write better cause-and-effect, problem-solution, and comparison-contrast essays. This is crucial as strong expository writing skills are assessed and given the most weight in the writing component of the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), the National Certificate of Education, which presents challenges for students attempting to excel in writing exposition [24]. Because the purpose of writing an exposition is to offer readers with information and new knowledge, ESL learners need to present their thoughts in a methodical, cohesive, and thorough manner. However, difficulties of writing the genre remain, with ESL learners frequently unable to get appropriate information owing to a lack of required skill, readings and resources, as well as battling with poor understanding of language structure, writing development and organization [25]. Overcoming these obstacles is critical for them to flourish in composing well-structured expository essays [26].

Due to inadequate language ability, ESL learners have significant challenges in their English writing skills [27]. This may be shown in their lack of grammatical knowledge. According to research done by Chang *et al.* [14], using verbs in writing presents problems for ESL learners since grammar may take several forms depending on the tense and subject. Similar findings were supported by Rizaldi *et al.* [25], which showed that ESL students had trouble choosing the right tenses when writing their explanatory essays. This is in line with studies conducted in the same field, which found that anxiety can be caused by a lack of grammar knowledge, which is essential for expressing ideas and creating acceptable sentences, especially when ESL learners try to produce phrases with precise syntax [28].

Another language difficulty that they have while writing expository essays is a lack of appropriate and diverse vocabulary. The usage of difficult or incorrect vocabulary, usually in an effort to impress their readers, or direct translation from the mother tongue, causes ESL learners to struggle regularly in selecting proper words to communicate their views [29], as well as a lack of topic-specific vocabulary [28]. Consequently, this hindered their ability to articulate and arrange their thoughts in writing, and the recurrence of phrases and words reduced their creativity and hampered readers' grasp of the intended meaning of the sentences [30].

Aside from grammar and vocabulary, they frequently suffer with connectors [31], [32]. Even though it is crucial to produce well-formed sentences with a variety of syntactic structures, a lack of experience with applying appropriate cohesive devices often leads to ESL learners using incorrect and fragmented phrases [33], [34]. As a result, learners found it difficult to grasp the written article, reducing their capacity to generate high-quality expository writing. Moreover, several studies [25], [35] showed that ESL learners were unable to construct coherent sentence structures, which is consistent with Nindya and Widiati finding [36] that these learners created fewer complex phrases and struggled to use cohesive devices, both of which are necessary for generating high-quality writing. Using more complex and sophisticated sentences in expository writing has become challenging due to their incapacity to use appropriate cohesive strategies. This issue arises from the need for higher cognitive function, which has led to the incoherency of expository writing.

Writing expository essays requires more cognitive work than other types of writing in terms of developing content and organization. ESL learners typically find it difficult to explore and express ideas because they prioritize grammar, spelling, and vocabulary over writing structure [37]. Perhaps as a result, the written work lacks depth, consistency, and originality. This has perhaps hindered total content development [25], [38]. Furthermore, previous research [39], [40] highlighted the need of combining reading and writing

abilities in order to increase writing performance among ESL learners. As a result, obstacles such as poor reading skills [41], inability to summarize, extract significant information, and paraphrase [42] restrict their capacity to expound on their arguments in writing and lead to difficulty in generating well-connected paragraphs. Later, Chigbu *et al.* [28] emphasizes this further, pointing out that ESL learners who are sporadic or infrequent readers could find expositions difficult because they have to organize their writing at both the content and structure levels. At the content level, obstacles arose as they attempted to explore concepts, explain reasoning, and investigate the implications of specific concerns. This resulted in unpleasant openers, undeveloped explanations and arguments as well as unappealing endings, all of which had an influence on the essay's structural level [28], [43].

As highlighted by Ferretti and Graham [44], writing offers a substantial obstacle for learners due to its convoluted evolution, which is frequently generated in poor quality. This is consistent with previous findings [45], which found that learners use metacognitive methods in writing exposition seldom. Because process-based writing is part of metacognitive methods, which prioritize the process above linguistics [46], each level presents unique obstacles owing to the demands of diverse cognitive and language capacities [47]. According to Pek *et al.* [48], many ESL students struggle to generate ideas to begin their writing because of poor background knowledge and a lack of creative and critical thinking during the brainstorming session, which has an impact on the whole writing process [28], [49]. Next, learners with writing anxiety have had difficulties throughout the revising and editing processes, preventing them from thoroughly reviewing their writing [50]. Though these stages are commonly seen as the most difficult for ESL learners [51], they also struggle with the drafting stage, which is influenced by the complicated nature of sentence formation and the writing structure itself [52]. In order to deal with this, it has been shown that incorporating collaborative activities and constructively critical peer and self-assessment into the process-based approach will help you avoid grammatical errors, which improves writing development and organization [53]–[55].

To close this gap and offer a thorough grasp of the difficulties, this paper looks at the issues that ESL students have when writing explanatory essays. The intention is to facilitate the creation of writing interventions that address the particular requirements of ESL students in order to enhance their capacity for expository writing. Therefore, the goal of this study is to respond to the following question:
− What difficulties did Form Four ESL students have while writing expository essays?

2. METHOD

The research design adopted for this study was a survey research design, which involved the systematic collection of numerical data and the subsequent application of statistical tool for analysis [56]. The rationale of this approach was to investigate the difficulties encountered by ESL learners in the process of writing expository essays. This aim is to facilitate the development of writing interventions that tailored to meet the needs of ESL learners with the ultimate goal of enhancing their proficiency in writing expositions.

Data was collected from 68 Form Four ESL learners, in Alor Gajah, comprising 29 males and 39 females, with majority have learned English as second language for over five years. Their current English proficiency, based on common European framework (CEFR) are ranging from A1 to A2, with very few in the B1 level, which showed that this group of respondents are of mixed ability ESL learners. The chosen sample size aligned with the principle advocated by previous studies [57], [58], where at least 30 respondents are required for quantitative research. The district and school selections were influenced by the low achievement ranking in the 2022 *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) results and the balanced representation of different races among learners, attributed to its location.

Participants were all sixteen years old and purposively sampled based on Piaget's "Formal Operational Stage," which signified learners' abstract thinking and problem-solving skills. These skills are pertinent in helping learners to organize complex ideas, analyze information critically and identify relationships between ideas [59], [60]. Overall, these skills contribute to the clarity and organization of thoughts, which enhance the quality of expository writing.

A questionnaire, adapted from previous studies [61], [62], was utilized to collect essential data on respondents' ability in writing exposition. The questionnaire was selected for its compatibility with the present research objective. Before distribution, this instrument underwent adjustments, including simplifying sentences and refining the writing genre. The instruments underwent a comprehensive validation process, which was developed by Elangovan and Sundaravel [63]. This thorough process involved five experts with extensive experience in module development. The instrument had gone multiple review processes after the adaptation and construction of the survey template before being sent to the experts. They ensured that the items in the questionnaire were relevant, representative and accurately measured the intended construct, thereby establishing strong content validity for the instrument. Essential feedback was also provided by the experts to aid in the improvement of the instrument.

The questionnaire delved in the challenges in specific writing skills in writing exposition. The questionnaire employed a 4-point Likert ranging from "easy", "moderate", "challenging" to "absolutely demanding" to facilitate clear choices and minimize ambiguity [64]. During the data collection process, requests for permission and clearance were submitted to the relevant authorities, including the educational planning and policy research division (EPRD) and the state educational department. Additionally, consent was obtained directly from the participants, which emphasizing in maintaining the confidentiality of responses, ensuring their anonymity and privacy throughout the survey. The questionnaire was distributed to all respondents through online platform. Participants were provided with a week to guarantee adequate time for thoughtful responses. Careful monitoring and supervision by the gatekeeper were employed to ensure that the responding process ran smoothly. This included providing clear instructions to the respondents and addressing any queries they had.

Quantitative data were acquired and analyzed using descriptive statistics through the statistical package for the social science (SPSS, Ver. 27). The findings were presented in frequencies, percentages and the total mean scores, which corresponded with [65] interpretation ranges and levels. The findings were then tabulated and explained in the findings section in line with the research objective as in Table 1 [65].

Table 1. Likert scale range explanation

Likert scale	Interval	Difference	Description
1	1.00 – 1.75	0.75	Easy
2	1.76 – 2.51	0.75	Moderate
3	2.52 – 3.27	0.75	Challenging
4	3.28 – 4.00	0.72	Absolutely demanding

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the research findings, which presented to address the challenges encountered by ESL learners in expository essay writing [66]. Learners' difficulties at different components of writing are displayed in Table 2. For structure of language, a majority of the respondents (58.9%, 40 ESL learners) considered it at a moderate level (M=2.38, SD=1.083), with 22.1% (15 ESL learners) viewed it 'easy' and 20.6% (14 ESL learners) considered it 'moderate'. However, 26.5% (18 ESL learners) regarded it as 'challenging' and 14.7% (10 ESL learners) found it 'extremely demanding'. This shows that a sizable proportion of respondents do not confront substantial obstacles in this area. Concerning the content development and organization component, 54.5% of the respondents (37 ESL learners) expressed a high level of difficulty (M=2.53, SD=1.085). Among them, 22.1% (15 ESL learners) found it 'challenging' and 32.4% (22 ESL learners) considered it 'extremely demanding'. However, a total of 45.6% of the respondents (31 ESL learners) rated this component as 'easy' (20.6%, 14 ESL learners) and 'moderate' (32.4%, 22 ESL learners). Hence, it can be concluded that this component presents a significant challenge in expository writing among Form Four ESL learners.

Table 2. Learners' difficulties at different components of writing

Component in writing	Writing difficulty				Mean	SD	Decision
	E n (%)	M n (%)	C n (%)	ED n (%)			
Structure of language	15 (22.1)	25 (36.8)	18 (26.5)	10 (14.7)	2.38	1.083	Moderate
Content development and organization	14 (20.6)	17 (25.0)	15 (22.1)	22 (32.4)	2.55	1.085	Challenging
Writing process	12 (17.6)	15 (22.1)	20 (29.4)	21 (30.9)	2.64	1.087	Challenging

Note: N=68; E=Easy; M=Moderate; C=Challenging; ED=Extremely demanding

The writing process was rated as the most demanding aspect by 60.3% (41 ESL learners, M=2.64, SD=1.087). Specifically, 29.4% (20 ESL learners) considered it 'challenging', while 30.9% (21 ESL learners) found it 'extremely demanding'. In contrast, 39.7% (27 ESL learners) perceived this aspect as 'easy' (17.6%, 12 ESL learners) and 'moderate' (22.1%, 15 ESL learners). This finding suggests that a significant number of respondents require extensive practice in structuring writing content and integrating the writing process compositions. Therefore, tailored interventions and additional practice opportunities are required to enhance respondents' skills in tackling these two writing components for improved composition.

3.1. Structure of language

In Table 3, significant insights are presented into the structure of language found in the expository writing of ESL learners. The challenges faced by respondents are evident in their struggle with utilizing a variety of sentence structures, applying appropriate vocabulary and successfully employing proper logical connectors in writing. Further details on this finding are elaborated as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Learners' perceived writing difficulties in structure of language

Items	E n (%)	M n (%)	C n (%)	ED n (%)	Mean	Decision
Structure of language						
To use a variety of sentence structures	10 (14.7)	14 (20.6)	29 (42.6)	15 (22.1)	2.72	Challenging
To use appropriate vocabulary to successfully communicate with the readers	12 (17.6)	18 (26.5)	23 (33.8)	15 (22.1)	2.60	Challenging
To use logical connector successfully	15 (22.1)	20 (29.4)	13 (19.1)	20 (29.4)	2.56	Challenging
To use appropriate word forms to successfully communicate with the readers	14 (20.6)	25 (36.8)	19 (27.9)	10 (14.7)	2.37	Moderate
To use correct grammar in my writing	18 (26.5)	29 (42.6)	10 (14.7)	11 (16.2)	2.21	Moderate
To use correct spellings in my writing	42 (35.3)	22 (32.4)	14 (20.6)	8 (11.8)	2.09	Moderate
To use correct punctuation	25 (36.8)	21 (30.9)	13 (19.1)	9 (13.2)	2.09	Moderate

Note: N=68; E=Easy; M=Moderate; C=Challenging; ED=Extremely demanding

In analyzing the structure of language as shown in Table 3, respondents offered complex insights on various aspects. Responses regarding the use of various sentence structures revealed that 14.7% of respondents thought it was easy, 20.6% found it moderate, 42.6% thought it as challenging and 22.1% considered it highly demanding. Similarly, 17.6% of respondents reported that using appropriate vocabulary was easy, 26.5% thought it moderate, 33.8% viewed it as challenging and 22.1% regarded it was extremely demanding. In utilizing logical connectors in writing, 22.1% deemed the ease in using this component. 29.4% said it moderate, 19.1% believed it was difficult and 29.4% thought it was highly demanding. Using the appropriate word forms was rated as easy by 20.6% of respondents, moderate by 36.8%, challenging by 27.9% and extremely demanding by 14.7%. Correct grammatical usage was rated easy by 26.5%, moderate by 42.6%, challenging by 14.7% and extremely demanding by 16.2%. Correct spellings were deemed easy by 35.3% of respondents, moderate by 32.4%, difficult by 20.6% and extremely difficult by 11.8%. Lastly, using proper punctuation was easy for 36.8% of the respondents. Another 30.9% thought it was moderate, 19.1% viewed it as challenging and 13.2% regarded it as extremely demanding. Despite the diverse responses, the overall mean, M=2.38, indicated a moderate level of difficulty for these language feature.

Though this component is not as demanding as content organization and development as well as writing process, it is noteworthy that ESL learners still encounter challenges when they are required to use a range of sentence patterns, employ proper vocabulary and integrate cohesive devices into their exposition. These challenges stemmed from numerous reasons. First and foremost, using different phrase patterns and advanced vocabulary becomes more complicated [29], [30], [33], [36]. A greater degree of language competency and cognitive skills are required for these skills, which include knowing the distinctive ways in which concepts may be related and selecting words that not only adhere to grammatical rules but also accurately express the intended meaning [25]. Furthermore, successful use of cohesive devices demands a deeper understanding of the concepts in order to learn to synthesize information and express linkages between distinct ideas within the subject matter. This necessitates not just linguistic skills but also the capacity to critically evaluate the material being provided [6]. Reaching this level of competency includes using more expressive and sophisticated vocabulary in written communication [11].

Aside from the difficulties in learning complicated skills, ESL learners' ability to use varied sentence patterns, rich vocabulary, and accurate logical connections in their writing may be limited by insufficient exposure to these features in both reading and writing experiences. Integrating these abilities could strengthen learners' writing by exposing them to a variety of texts. Additionally, providing low-proficiency learners with quality reading resources that serve as example writings has exposed learners to appropriate language, writing techniques, and sentence structures [39], [40]. In contrast, the emphasis on acquiring fundamental grammar and writing abilities appears to make it easier to apply appropriate word forms, accurate tenses, spellings, and punctuation [37]. The emphasis on these abilities has prevented

students from exploring more sophisticated writing techniques, even though they are crucial. As a result, students were not given enough direction on how to use appropriate language, various sentence patterns, and logical connectors [25]. Expository writing challenges should therefore be addressed by creating a supportive learning environment where students feel encouraged to express themselves creatively and have more opportunities to play with language.

3.2. Content development and organization

The findings presented in Table 4 shed light on the aspect of content development and organization in ESL learners' expository writing. It is apparent that respondents encountered challenges in writing and accurate summary of information they have read in English, supporting and developing main points with examples when composing paragraphs, taking effective notes on readings and utilizing then to support their ideas in writing. Details regarding these challenges are outlined in Table 4 and the corresponding explanation.

Table 4. Learners' perceived writing difficulties in content development and organization

Items	E n (%)	M n (%)	C n (%)	ED n (%)	Mean	Decision
Content development and organization						
To write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English	8 (11.8)	13 (19.1)	30 (44.1)	17 (25.0)	2.82	Challenging
To support and develop my main points with examples when I write a paragraph	11 (16.2)	15 (22.1)	28 (41.2)	14 (20.6)	2.66	Challenging
To take good note on readings and use them to help support my ideas in writing	11 (16.2)	19 (27.9)	28 (41.2)	10 (14.7)	2.54	Challenging
To write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English	8 (11.8)	13 (19.1)	30 (44.1)	17 (25.0)	2.54	Challenging
To write a clear topic sentence that introduce the main points of the paragraph	12 (17.6)	18 (26.5)	31 (45.6)	7 (10.3)	2.49	Moderate
To write conclusion that correspond to the ideas mentioned in the introduction	13 (19.1)	26 (38.2)	17 (25.0)	12 (17.6)	2.41	Moderate
To write using a formal style and tone	18 (26.5)	17 (25.0)	22 (32.4)	11 (16.2)	2.38	Moderate

Note: N=68; E=Easy; M=Moderate; C=Challenging; ED=Extremely demanding

Regarding content organization and development as displayed in Table 4 and reflected in the overall mean score, M=2.55, respondents perceived this feature as challenging as evidenced by their diverse experiences across different components. In the task of writing an accurate summary of information, 11.8% found it easy, 19.1% considered it moderate, 44.1% perceived it as challenging and 25.0% deemed it extremely demanding. Similarly, their ability to support and elaborate on main points with examples within a paragraph faced corresponding difficulty levels, as 16.2% finding it easy, 22.1% considering it moderate, but majority claiming it to be challenging (41.2%) and extremely demanding (20.6%). This could be contributed by their ability to take effective notes on readings and utilize them to support their ideas in writing as indicated by the finding that a total of 55.9% of respondents claimed this as 'challenging' (41.2%) and 'extremely demanding (14.7%). Nevertheless, 16.2% found this feature 'easy' and 27.9% viewed it as 'moderate'. In addition to the construct, majority of the respondents expressed that it was 'challenging' (44.1%) and 'extremely demanding' (25.0%) for them to incorporate paraphrased information into their writing, whereas 11.8% considered it to be 'easy' and another 19.1% agreed that they have a moderate level of paraphrasing skills.

Furthermore, writing a clear topic sentence introducing the main idea of a paragraph was perceived as easy by 17.6%, moderate by 26.5%, challenging by 45.6% and extremely demanding by 10.3%. This indicates that respondents encountered difficulty in formulating a clear topic sentence. In contrast, for writing a conclusion corresponding to the ideas mentioned in the introduction, a total of 57.3% regarded this writing element as manageable, where 19.1% found it easy and 38.2% considered it to be moderate. However, 25.0% perceived it as challenging and 17.6% expressed that it was challenging. Lastly, when it comes to adopting a formal style and tone in writing, 26.5% perceived it easy and 25.0% viewed it as moderate. Hence, this emphasized that the respondents' ability to employ suitable style and tone in their written task. Also, it is worth mentioning that 32.4% found it challenging and 16.2% deemed it extremely difficult.

It is clear that content development and organization emerge as the challenging aspect in mastering ESL expository writing skills, as emphasized by the respondents. The findings reveal that ESL learners encounter heightened challenges to write an accurate summary of information, support and develop main points with elaborations and examples, take good notes on readings for ideas and accurately paraphrase information due to the complex cognitive processes involved in these tasks. To further elaborate, these skills

are closely linked to their ability to understand and synthesize the reading texts [28]. Acquiring these skills enables ESL learners to effectively apply their understanding and background knowledge to support ideas in their writing, which showcases a deeper comprehension of the subject matter, as highlighted in previous studies [41], [42]. This proficiency is particularly evident when learners engage in strong reading and note taking skills, that require them to identify essential information and connect it to their own thoughts. Unlike writing topic sentence or conclusion or applying correct format and style in writing, these skills demand a higher-order thinking skills, critical analysis and learners' ability to express ideas coherently and effectively in their expository writing.

3.3. Writing process

Table 5 illustrates important findings related to the writing process in ESL learners' expository writing. The findings revealed that respondents encountered difficulties in revising their own writing to enhance the development and organization of ideas, editing their writing after completing their first draft and drafting effective paragraphs with elaborations. Further insights into these challenges are detailed in Table 5 and its discussion.

Table 5. Learners' perceived writing difficulties in writing process

Items	E n (%)	M n (%)	C n (%)	ED n (%)	Mean	Decision
Writing process						
To revise my own writing to improve the development and organization of ideas	11 (16.2)	15 (22.1)	18 (26.5)	24 (35.3)	2.81	Challenging
To edit my writing after completing my first draft	10 (14.7)	17 (25.0)	27 (39.7)	14 (20.6)	2.66	Challenging
To draft a good paragraph with elaborations	11 (16.2)	16 (23.5)	29 (42.6)	12 (17.6)	2.62	Challenging
To outline and logically organize my ideas before writing	13 (19.1)	22 (32.4)	24 (35.3)	9 (13.2)	2.43	Moderate

Note: N=68; E=Easy; M=Moderate; C=Challenging; ED=Extremely demanding

The third construct, as highlighted in Table 5, indicated the highest overall mean score of M=2.64, suggests that writing process is the most difficult element the respondents in their writing. This aspect encompassed various aspects of skill and proficiency. Firstly, concerning the task of revising the writing to improve the development and organization of ideas, respondents showed a high level of difficulty, with 26.5% perceived it as challenging and 35.3% claiming it to be extremely demanding. However, another 16.2% found it to be easy and 22.1% reported it as moderate.

Next, editing after completing the initial draft is also assessed with varying levels of ease. Here, 14.7% found it easy, 25.0% considered it moderate, 39.7% perceived it as challenging and 20.6% rated it as extremely demanding. This finding suggests that respondents were prone to find this element as a significant obstacle in their ability to produce good composition. In constructing a well-organized paragraph with detailed elaborations, the finding found that 16.2% of the respondents viewed this as easy and 23.5% claimed the element is moderate. In contrast, 42.6% found it challenging and 17.6% thought it was extremely demanding. As for the final item in the construct, evaluating the outlining and logical structuring of ideas before initiating the writing process revealed that 19.1% considered it easy, 32.4% said it was moderate, 35.3% of the respondents thought it was challenging and 13.2% claimed it was extremely demanding for them. This finding highlights the complex nature of the writing process, with respondents believed most items in this construct as challenging to practice in their writing lessons.

According to the findings of the research, writing coherent paragraphs with elaborations and editing and reworking them are common challenges for ESL students. Their inadequate proficiency in English may contribute to their challenges as they may find it challenging to identify and correct grammatical, syntactic, and vocabulary issues [27]. Moreover, these issues are made worse by a lack of vast English writing experience and exposure to appropriate writing structures [47], [51]. ESL learners find it challenging to understand the complex nature of writing because they lack appropriate feedback, assistance, and confidence in their ability to use the language [17], [20], [50]. Moreover, the lack of organization of thoughts in writing is also influenced by the ineffective use cohesive devices [35] and excessive emphasis on other linguistic elements [46]. Addressing these challenges necessitates tailored language interventions, specific feedback, peer collaboration and accessible language resources and support as suggested by several studies [54], [55].

In summary, the result of this study indicate that the respondents had a moderate level of skill in language structure. They demonstrated difficulties in sentence structures, vocabulary usage and the of logical

connectors. Nonetheless, difficulties arose with regard to the development and organization of the content. The respondents noted that activities like summarizing, developing and supporting their points with elaboration in writing, note-taking and paraphrasing were especially challenging. The writing process stood up as the most difficult aspect, indicating challenges with activities like editing the written draft, supporting important arguments within paragraphs and revising for improved writing development and organization. Together, these insights highlight the complexity of the writing process and the difficulties in raising the overall quality of the written pieces. These challenges further emphasize the inherent difficulty in acquiring proficient writing skills.

4.   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the challenges faced by ESL learners in their pursuit of improving their expository writing skills. The study emphasizes that the learners are struggling more in developing and organizing their writing contents and integrating writing process in producing their exposition, compared to applying basic language features in their writing, as the former requires them to have higher cognitive ability to understand the subject matter and connect ideas, so that their writings are coherent, which facilitates effective communication. Specifically, the study also highlights challenges in varying their sentence structures, expanding range of vocabulary and effectively link ideas through appropriate cohesive devices. Consequently, this has drawn attention to the need of creating conducive learning environment that promotes creativity and allows experimentation with language usage, given the limited opportunities for them to practice in doing so. Also, the research highlights the significant obstacles faced by the learners in developing and organizing ideas, as well as the overall process of producing quality exposition. This emphasizes the imperative for these learners to employ critical thinking skills in analyzing information and gain more exposure in writing strategies. The research offers potential strategies in overcoming these challenges, including providing constructive feedback and fostering collaboration among peers. Looking ahead, further research should be conducted in developing tailored teaching and learning approach that can assist these ESL learners.

To improve the generalization and application of the study's findings, future research should broaden its scope to include different diversity of ESL settings and a larger representative sample of ESL learners by comparing urban and rural language learning environment or exploring the differences between ESL learners in public schools and private institutions. This broader approach can yield stronger and generally more practical results, which would contribute to a greater understanding of ESL learners' writing difficulties. Furthermore, future research should include investigating writing genres other than expository essays to enrich the understanding of effective interventions in ESL writing, as a whole. Incorporating reflective or creative writing into research efforts will provide a more holistic view that allows researchers and educators to create treatments that promote success in broader range of language learning environment. By embracing a more diverse range of ESL contexts and incorporating multiple writing genres, future research can make significant contributions to the advancement of effective language learning strategies.

REFERENCES

[1]   I. Hassan, A. M. A. Rahman, and M. N. L. Azmi, "Development of English writing skills through blended learning among ESL learners in Malaysia," *Arab World English Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 377–389, 2021, doi: 10.24093/awej/call7.26.
[2]   M. D. Bahang, A. R. Nawun, A. A. Wutun, and M. Nurhusain, "The use of thematic progression in writing: hortatory exposition text at second grade students of SMA Negeri 1 Elar," *The Educational Review, USA*, vol. 5, no. 10, pp. 385–390, 2021, doi: 10.26855/er.2021.10.002.
[3]   R. Smith, P. Snow, T. Serry, and L. Hammond, "The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension: a critical review," *Reading Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 214–240, 2021, doi: 10.1080/02702711.2021.1888348.
[4]   U. Demiral, "Examination of critical thinking skills of preservice science teachers: a perspective of social constructivist theory," *Journal of Education and Learning*, vol. 7, no. 4, p. 179, 2018, doi: 10.5539/jel.v7n4p179.
[5]   T. Su-Hie, M. Ernisa, C. Kee-Man, M. Jecky, and J. Collin, "Employers' view on the importance of English proficiency and communication skill for employability in Malaysia," *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 315–327, 2017.
[6]   C. K. S. Singh, R. Gopal, E. T. Ong, T. S. M. Singh, N. A. Mostafa, and R. K. A. Singh, "ESL teachers' strategies to foster higher-order thinking skills to teach writing," *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 195–226, 2020, doi: 10.32890/mjli2020.17.2.7.

[7]   N. Ceylana, "Student perceptions of difficulties in second language writing," *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 111–135, 2019.

[8]   A. S. Soomro, "Challenges faced by the second language learners: a review," *Sindh Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 51–57, 2022, doi: 10.58921/sindhjol.v1i1.10.

[9]   T. P. Utama, "Portfolio system in teaching writing: efl students' perceptions," *Pedagogy : Journal of English Language Teaching*, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 159, 2020, doi: 10.32332/pedagogy.v8i2.2262.

[10]   Y. Cheng, "Research on cooperative interactive teaching model in college English based on multimedia network," in *Proceedings of the 2016 International Conference on Education, Sports, Arts and Management Engineering*, Paris, France: Atlantis Press, 2016. doi: 10.2991/icesame-16.2016.266.

[11]   S. T. Palpanadan, E. M. Anthony, N. M. Ngadiran, H. Kadir, and A. Zainal, "Comparative analysis of writing approaches practised in Malaysian ESL classrooms," *Journal of Education & Social Policy*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2019, doi: 10.30845/jesp.v6n3p17.

[12]   W. Naeem, Z. Ashraf, and Z. A. Afsar, "Factors causing ESL students' demotivation to learn English," *Global Language Review*, vol. VIII, no. I, pp. 114–122, 2023, doi: 10.31703/glr.2023(viii-i).11.

[13]   A. Mustafa, A. N. Arbab, and A. A. El Sayed, "Difficulties in academic writing in English as a second/foreign language from the perspective of undergraduate students in higher education institutions in Oman," *Arab World English Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 226–238, 2013.

[14]   P. Chang, C. C. Tsai, and P. ju Chen, "Organization strategies in EFL expository essays in a content-based language learning course," *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 183–197, 2020, doi: 10.1007/s40299-019-00464-2.

[15]   A. L. Rojas Vargas, A. P. Solano Quesada, J. M. Vargas Vásquez, and A. Jiménez Rojas, "Consciousness-raising tasks for the mediation of text structure, cohesion, and coherence in essay writing," *Actualidades Investigativas en Educación*, vol. 20, no. 2, p. 27, 2020, doi: 10.15517/aie.v20i2.41669.

[16]   N. Kitjaroonchai and S. Suppasetseree, "Online collaborative writing via Google Docs: case studies in the EFL classroom," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, vol. 12, no. 6, pp. 922–934, 2021, doi: 10.17507/JLTR.1206.08.

[17]   R. Akhtar, H. Hassan, A. B. Saidalvi, and S. Hussain, "A systematic review of the challenges and solutions of ESL students' academic writing," *International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology*, vol. 8, no. 5, pp. 1169–1171, 2019, doi: 10.35940/ijeat.E1164.0585C19.

[18]   C. W. Jo, "Exploring general versus academic English proficiency as predictors of adolescent EFL essay writing," *Written Communication*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 208–246, 2021, doi: 10.1177/0741088320986364.

[19]   T. N. Fitria, "Error analysis found in students' writing composition of simple future tense," *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 240–251, 2018, doi: 10.34050/els-jish.v1i3.5028.

[20]   R. N. Moses and M. Mohamad, "Challenges faced by students and teachers on writing skills in ESL contexts: a literature review," *Creative Education*, vol. 10, no. 13, pp. 3385–3391, 2019, doi: 10.4236/ce.2019.1013260.

[21]   M. G. Maru, C. C. Pikirang, and N. Liando, "Integrating writing with listening in EFL class: a systematic review," in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Social Sciences (ICSS 2020)*, Atlantis Press, 2020. doi: 10.2991/assehr.k.201014.048.

[22]   S. R. Murtiningsih, S. Kurniawati, and A. W. D. Putri, "University EFL Students' Grammar Mastery and Their Writing Ability: A Quantitative Study," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Sustainable Innovation on Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences (ICOSI-HESS 2022)*, 2022. doi: 10.2991/978-2-494069-65-7_21.

[23]   L. B. Zaki, "The use of dictogloss to improve students' writing in Muhammadiyah plus secondary school batam," *Journal of English Pedagogy, Linguistics, Literature, and Teaching*, vol. 10, no. 2, Sep. 2022, doi: 10.35194/jj.v10i2.2606.

[24]   Z. Mohamad Safar, *The science and art of teaching writing among potential ESL learners*. Kedah: Darul Aman English Language Learning and Teaching Association (DELTA), 2020.

[25]   F. Rizaldi, M. Mukrim, and H. Hastini, "Identification of students' difficulty in writing expository essay," *e-Journal of ELTS (English Language Teaching Society)*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 217–226, 2023, doi: 10.22487/elts.v10i3.3181.

[26]   Malaysia Ministry of Education, *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education, 2013.

[27]   J. N. B. Apolonio, "Effectiveness of 'how to write a sentence' as instructional material to improve the writing skills of grade 6 pupils," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 958–963, 2023, doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.04.03.25.

[28]   G. U. Chigbu *et al.*, "Enhancing esl students' academic achievement in expository essay writing using digital graphic organisers: a mixed-methods research," *Heliyon*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2023, doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e15589.

[29]   R. Karimian Shirejini and A. Derakhshan, "An investigation of the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions towards the most common writing problems," *SAGE Open*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2020, doi: 10.1177/2158244020919523.

[30]   R. Dhuli, P. Lamo, and V. N. Larsari, "An analysis of the significance of vocabulary in fostering ESL/EFL students' writing skills: an empirical study," *International Journal of Contemporary Studies in Education (IJ-CSE)*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2023, doi: 10.56855/ijcse.v2i1.252.

[31]   C. C. A. J. Linggir and H. Yamat, "Common mistakes in primary year 6 English as second language (ESL) pupils' sentence construction using word-phrase-sentence (WPS) pyramid strategy," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2020, doi: 10.6007/ijarbss/v10-i2/6960.

[32]   V. Chandra Segaran and H. Hashim, "'More online quizzes, please!' the effectiveness of online quiz tools in enhancing the learning of grammar among esl learners," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 1, Jan. 2022, doi: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i1/12064.

[33]   K. Ariffin, N. A. Darus, N. Abdul Halim, and N. A. Awang, "Analysing morphological errors in esl graduating students' writing based on surface structure taxonomy," *International Journal of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics*, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 42, 2021, doi: 10.24191/ijmal.v5i3.14231.

[34]   H. Wijayanti, S. Suwandi, and S. W. Fitriati, "Assessing the students' use of cohesive devices in writing hortatory exposition text," *English Education Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 363–369, 2023, doi: 10.15294/eej.v13i3.72805.

[35]   H. Hashim, K. Rafiqah M. Rafiq, and M. Md. Yunus, "Improving esl learners' grammar with gamified-learning," *Arab World English Journal*, no. 5, pp. 41–50, Jul. 2019, doi: 10.24093/awej/call5.4.

[36]   M. A. Nindya and U. Widiati, "Cohesive devices in argumentative essays by Indonesian EFL learners," *Journal on English as a Foreign Language*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 337–358, 2020, doi: 10.23971/jefl.v10i2.1949.

[37]   S. A/L Palanisamy and A. A. Aziz, "Systematic review: challenges in teaching writing skills for upper secondary in ESL classrooms and suggestions to overcome them," *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 262–275, 2021.

[38]   N. H. B. Ismail and A. B. M. Sabil, "An analysis of writing competency principle and its problem in essay writing," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2019, doi: 10.6007/ijarped/v8-i4/6910.

[39] K. Anaktototy, B. Samponu, and H. Loppies, "Portraying students' grammatical errors in essay writing: a study at english education study program pattimura university," *English Language Teaching and Linguistics Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. p6, 2023, doi: 10.22158/eltls.v5n1p6.

[40] L. Emak and H. H. Ismail, "Incorporating reading in writing classes and its effects on esl learners' writing," *Creative Education*, vol. 12, no. 08, pp. 1949–1962, 2021, doi: 10.4236/ce.2021.128149.

[41] S. C. Andersen, M. V. Christensen, H. S. Nielsen, M. K. Thomsen, T. Østerbye, and M. L. Rowe, "How reading and writing support each other across a school year in primary school children," *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, vol. 55, pp. 129–138, 2018, doi: 10.1016/j.cedpsych.2018.09.005.

[42] H. T. N. Nguyen, T. U. Pham, and T. M. U. Phan, "Difficulties in writing essays of english majored sophomores at tay do university, vietnam," *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2021, doi: 10.46827/ejel.v6i2.3518.

[43] N. A. Sulaiman, K. Salehuddin, and R. Khairuddin, "Reading english academic texts: evidence from esl undergraduates' eye movement data," *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 60–78, 2020, doi: 10.17576/3L-2020-2601-05.

[44] R. P. Ferretti and S. Graham, "Argumentative writing: theory, assessment, and instruction," *Reading and Writing*, vol. 32, no. 6, pp. 1345–1357, 2019, doi: 10.1007/s11145-019-09950-x.

[45] M. Rashtchi, R. Porkar, and S. F. G. M. Saeed, "Product-based, process-based, and genre-based instructions in expository writing: focusing on EFL learners' performance," *European Journal of Education Studies*, vol. 6, no. 6, pp. 115–136, 2019.

[46] F. Liaghat and R. Biria, "A comparative study on mentor text modelling and common approaches to teaching writing in Iranian EFL context," *International Journal of Instruction*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 701–720, 2018, doi: 10.12973/IJI.2018.11347A.

[47] T. Jagaiah, D. Howard, and N. Olinghouse, "Writer's checklist: a procedural support for struggling writers," *Reading Teacher*, vol. 73, no. 1, pp. 103–110, 2019, doi: 10.1002/trtr.1802.

[48] L. S. Pek, R. W. M. Mee, and K. Abdul Ghani, "Selfie as prompt for narrative writing," *PROJECT (Professional Journal of English Education)*, vol. 3, no. 6, p. 651, 2020, doi: 10.22460/project.v3i6.p651-656.

[49] X. Liu, N. A. Samah, and S. M. Salleh, "The impact of using a mobile app on improving students' creative thinking in business English writing with self-regulated learning," *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies*, vol. 16, no. 15, pp. 46–61, 2022, doi: 10.3991/ijim.v16i15.31477.

[50] R. P. Kabigting *et al.*, "Anxiety and writing ability of Filipino ESL learners," *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, vol. 3, no. 7, pp. 126–132, 2020, doi: 10.32996/ijllt.2020.3.7.14.

[51] I. H. Sandhya Fernando, "Improving writing skills in english as a second language (ESL) through feedback, revising and multiple draft writing: an action research," *CINEC Academic Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 39–43, Dec. 2020, doi: 10.4038/caj.v4i0.31.

[52] M. Alghamdi and M. C. Reed, "The value students and instructors place on multimodal composition within academic life," *Arab World English Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 283–297, 2019, doi: 10.24093/awej/vol10no1.24.

[53] M. N. Bin Azman and M. K. Bin Ayub, "Collaborative writing strategies: the effects on Malaysia secondary school learners' writing fluency," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2021, doi: 10.6007/ijarped/v10-i2/10595.

[54] N. Hidayati, S. Zubaidah, and S. Amnah, "Effective learning model bases problem based learning and digital mind maps to improve student's collaboration skills," *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 1307–1314, 2023, doi: 10.11591/ijere.v12i3.22654.

[55] R. G. Bautista and W. B. Baniqued, "From competition to collaboration: unraveling teachers' lesson study experiences," *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 921–929, 2021, doi: 10.11591/ijere.v10i3.21101.

[56] J. Pallant, *SPSS survival manual*, 6th ed. New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2016.

[57] M. G. Lodico, D. T. Spaulding, and K. H. Voegtle, *Methods in educational research: from theory to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass A Wiley Imprint, 2006.

[58] R. V. Krejcie and D. W. Morgan, "Determining sample size for research activities," *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 607–610, 1970, doi: 10.1177/001316447003000308.

[59] Z. H. Babakr, P. Mohamedamin, and K. Kakamad, "Piaget's cognitive developmental theory: critical review," *Education Quarterly Reviews*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2019, doi: 10.31014/aior.1993.02.03.84.

[60] S. Campbell *et al.*, "Purposive sampling: complex or simple? research case examples," *Journal of Research in Nursing*, vol. 25, no. 8, pp. 652–661, Dec. 2020, doi: 10.1177/1744987120927206.

[61] J. Vicente, "ESLP 82 questionnaire: self-assessment of English writing skills and use of writing strategies self-assessment of English writing skills use of learning strategies," pp. 2–4, 2018.

[62] J. Meto and K. C. Mishra, "ESL academic writing: perceptions of post-graduate learners of Arunachal Pradesh," *Journal of English Language Teaching*, vol. 64, no. 5, pp. 3–15, 2022.

[63] N. Elangovan and E. Sundaravel, "Method of preparing a document for survey instrument validation by experts," *MethodsX*, vol. 8, 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.mex.2021.101326.

[64] J. T. Croasmun and L. Ostrom, "Using Likert-type scales in the social sciences," *Journal of Adult Education*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 19–22, 2011.

[65] J. L. Pimentel, "Some biases in Likert scaling usage and its correction," *International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 183–191, 2019.

[66] A. Liberati *et al.*, "The PRISMA statement for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses of studies that evaluate health care interventions: explanation and elaboration," *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 6, no. 7, 2009, doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1000100.

BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

Noorfatin Zakaria 🆔 🔍 SC ⟳ is an English teacher with almost 10 years of teaching experience in secondary school. Graduated from University of Portsmouth, UK in B.ed. TESL. She is currently pursuing her Master's degree in TESL at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to further explore the field of ESL. Her area of interest is English language learning strategies. For her, learning is a valuable and lifelong process that leads to personal and professional growth as well as greater wisdom and understanding. She can be contacted at email: nrfatinzakaria@gmail.com.

Nur Ainil Sulaiman 🆔 🔍 SC ⟳ received the Ph.D degree in English Language Studies from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, where she is currently the Head of Graduate Program of Center for Innovation in Learning and Teaching Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her current research interest includes students' learning and development at various levels and areas of education. Her publication topics focusing on second language acquisition, English language learning and sociolinguistics. She can be contacted at email: nurainil@ukm.edu.my.