How do EFL university student-writers prepare their draft? An analysis of writing strategy use in EFL writing instruction

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ABSTRACT

The use of writing strategy across writing levels in a virtual EFL writing course was still rarely found in the literature. To fill this gap, therefore, this current research aims at exploring writing strategy in EFL writing instruction. Informed by a research framework of descriptive case study, university student-writers who regularly attended a virtual academic writing course filled out the online writing strategy inventory (Yang & Plakans, 2012) and submitted the argumentative essays. The findings show that the writing strategy was diverse across levels. At the stage of before drafting the essay, all student-writers reread task requirement and understood the type of essay and organization, searched for valid references, and tried to avoid plagiarism. Moreover, student-writers with higher levels also summarized ideas, analyzed sentences and contents, and made writing plan. At drafting the essay, they double checked the requirement, revised the essay, reread the essay and the sample texts, and provided valid arguments. However, student-writer with lowest level was not used those strategies. At the stage of after drafting, student-writers in all levels applied similar several writing strategies. However, not all of them added new points from sample texts, references, and lecture. To the student-writer with the lowest level, several writing strategies were not applied. This may indicate that student-writers with higher levels have writing awareness to use writing strategy effectively to improve their essay. Then, it can be

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drawn a conclusion that the more writing strategies used during drafting the essay, the more score and the higher quality of the essay was possibly achieved.

Keywords: *EFL writing; Writing strategy; Writing instruction; University students*

1. Introduction

Seeing English as foreign language writing (hereafter EFL writing) from the view of student-writers brings a sense of struggles in some areas, such as linguistic, cognitive, and psychological constraints (Rahmatunisa, 2014), such as lack of ideas and uncertain linguistic strategy (Rao, 2007) as well as cultural problems (Zhang, 2018). It is unquestionable that, for EFL student-writers, writing activity can be a challenging and stressful task (Zhu, 2001) and the most difficult skill to learn (Hamed, 2014; Setyowati, Sukmawa, & Latief, 2017; Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). As a number of mistakes found in students' essays, some of their writing products seemingly presented poor structure and flow with the lack of literature supports and too descriptive rather than critical/reflective writing (West, Malcolm, Keywood, & Hill, 2019). It may indicate they do not prepare their drafts in ways that meet the writing task requirement, such as selecting topics, providing solid evidence/supports, and structuring the text. An effective student-writer is consciously aware that, to achieve a well-organized text with strong arguments, a writing strategy needs to be applied when drafting the text. The writing strategy then refers to some techniques used by the writers during the process of writing to control its quality (De Silva, 2015; Okasha & Hamdi, 2014).

Extensive researches and studies have been conducted to explore writing strategies in terms of various techniques used, its effectiveness, and its implication among learner attributes. Pre-writing strategy in three-time dimensions: before writing, during writing, and during revision brings significant effects on writing achievement and performance (De Silva, 2015; Mahnam & Nejadansari, 2012). The instruction of writing strategy might be resulted in the higher quality of students' essays (Al-Shaer, 2014). On the other hand, some studies also found that brainstorming (i.e., listing, outlining, question and answer) as the pre-writing strategies did not provide significant effect among male and female student-writers. Moreover, university Thai EFL students preferred to use cognitive strategies during writing, and it was no significant relations between the use of writing strategy and writing achievement (Apridayani, Yungkun, Thoch, & Ruththong, 2021).

Despite the extensive investigations on writing strategy in EFL writing class, the techniques used by the learners during writing are unique and context-specific (Hu & Chen, 2007). Brainstorming and cognitive methods are widely employed as strategies in face-to-face learning systems when drafting a writing work. However, studies dealing with writing approach across writing levels in a virtual course are still uncommon. Indeed, the study to investigate how student-writers prepare their drafts may aid writing faculties/instructors in gaining a deeper understanding of how student-writers learn to

write; hence, this may implicate faculties/instructors in creating writing activities in virtual classrooms. Hence, this present research was addressed to answer the following question: what are writing strategies used by the university student-writers across writing levels in drafting and preparing their argumentative essays during EFL virtual writing course?

2. Literature review

2.1. EFL writing instruction

The landscapes of foreign writing instruction naturally came from diverse teaching and learning contexts, and their theoretical discussions were mostly underpinned by research in L1 composition and ESL contexts (Bhowmik, 2009). Writing can be viewed at least in three perspectives: writing as a product, writing as a process and writing as a social activity (Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). Then, it leads to teaching writing methodology (i.e., product approach, process approach, genre-based approach) (Badger & White, 2000; Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). At the classroom level, EFL writing contexts are diverse with unique characteristics and, various cultural and socio-political situations (Bhowmik, 2009).

Specifically, in Indonesia, teaching EFL writing contexts has brought uniqueness and context-specific related to its policy and challenges. EFL writing has been a part of English subject at schools and taught based on the policy on the level of educational institutions (Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). Many student-writers in Indonesia seem to experience a high level of anxiety when writing in English (Wahyuni & Umam, 2017). The challenges are usually found in three aspects, such as linguistic, cognitive, and psychological problems (Rahmatunisa, 2014). Particularly in the academic settings, Juliaty (2019) reported that novice student-writers might have weak identity reflection and struggled in adjusting and engaging in academic environment due to a lack of exposure, familiarity, and understanding toward academic writing culture.

Despite the struggles and challenges, along with the advancement of technology in EFL classrooms worldwide, the face of EFL writing classroom has recently become more sophisticated and engaging. Technological tools or devices have helped both students and teachers in preparing and executing lessons, drafting essays, and assessing students' writing product as well as improving writing performance. For instance, blogging has facilitated process-based writing instruction (Özdemir & Aydın, 2015), and self-blogging helped students build metalinguistic awareness (İnceçay & Genç, 2014). In addition, weblog peer review can promote a marked improvement in students' effective writing behaviour (Chen, 2012). Virtual writing classes through learning management system, such as Edmodo (Ma'azi & Janfeshan, 2018), Blackboard (Fageeh & Mekheimer, 2013) have also brought more positive attitude toward writing activity.

Furthermore, the web-based learning in writing classes, such as WebQuest (Latuperissa, 2012) and web-based pre-writing activities (Zaid, 2011), were found to be effective as instructional tool that made the students wrote longer and drafted richer in

online mapping and online reading. Social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter) has mediated writing course and activity particularly in teaching mechanics (Altakhaineh & Al-Jallad, 2018) and improved students' motivation. Besides, peer and teacher electronic feedback or e-feedback (Abdullah, Hussin, & Shakir, 2018) has decreased the students' level of writing anxiety, and implementation of automated tracked system of teacher feedback contributed to improve the quality revision and revised texts (Cheng, 2019). Additionally, automated writing evaluation (AWE) tool has enhanced the grammar accuracy on the students' essays on the third composition (Liao, 2016). Though the expansion of technology have provenly brought positive implication in writing performance, some issues related to technological competences of teachers and learners and internet access have become problems for many (Boudjadar, 2015).

2.2. Writing strategy in EFL writing instruction

Generally, writing strategy can be defined as "a conscious mental activity, employed in pursuit of a goal, often with an aim to solve a problem in writing" (De Silva, 2015, p. 2). The strategy can be also referred to some techniques used by the learners in creating a writing product and improving its quality (Apridayani, Yungkun, Thoch, & Ruththong, 2021). In a simple manner, Okasha and Hamdi (2014, p. 675) wrote writing strategies as 'ways of controlling writing process to produce well-organized production crystallized by high quality'. The strategies can be grouped into direct strategy and indirect strategy (Oxford, 1990). To be more specific, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Apridayani, et al. (2021) classified writing strategies into four categories: cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. These then have gained much attention on discussions and research in the field of writing instruction.

Table 1
Types of writing strategies.

Strategies	Descriptions
Cognitive strategies	Techniques used in the transformation/synthesis of incoming information
Metacognitive strategies	Techniques used to plan, reflect, monitor, and evaluate writing activities/outcomes
Social strategies	Strategies to involve other people by doing some interactions.
Affective strategies	Strategies for controlling or getting rid of negative feelings during the writing process

Source: Apridayani, et al. , (2021), O'Malley and Chamot (1990)

Numerous studies of writing strategies have been extensively found, particularly looking at how its effect on writing achievement and other writing attributes. The study of Saudi EFL students' writing strategies found that students with low anxiety are more users of writing strategies than the students with high level (Asmari, 2013). The dimensions of writing strategies cover before starting the writing, during the writing,

and during revision. Moreover, the investigation by Mahnam and Nejadansari (2012) to twenty three adult EFL learners in Iran showed that pre-writing strategies give a significant effect on the students' writing achievement. The writing strategies the students chose for their writing were using relevant texts, negotiating of topics, making concept map. To more specific on concept mapping as pre-writing strategy in a focused instructional strategy, it improves the quality of students' argumentative essays in the aspects of point of view, unity, coherence, development, organization, and thinking (Al-Shaer, 2014). Moreover, the instruction of strategy gives positive impact on writing performance (De Silva, 2015) and writing attitude (Okasha & Hamdi, 2014), particularly at pre-writing stage in which focuses on developing main concepts, logical connection among ideas and writing organization (Al-Shaer, 2014).

Apart from its benefits in writing achievement, the use of writing strategies towards other learner attributes such as gender and writing ability anchored the contrasting results. Brainstorming as pre-writing strategy gives no significant differences on its sub-categories: listing, outlining, and question and answer among males and females (Hashempour, Rostampour, & Behjat, 2015). In almost a similar fashion, study by Apridayani et al. (2021) concluded that, though most university Thai EFL students applied cognitive strategies during writing, there was no significant differences among the low and high writing achievers. Additionally, despite its positive relationships among writing strategies, it was no significant relations found on the use of writing strategies and their writing achievement.

3. Method

This current study was guided by a descriptive case study research paradigm (Nunan, 2013), which demonstrates an in-depth portrayal of a specific bounded phenomenon using different data sources in specific circumstances (Casanave, 2015; Duff, 2020). This study also looked into the writing strategies utilized by EFL university student-writers in a virtual writing course. To be more specific, this current investigation described the writers' strategy in drafting, composing, and completing argumentative essay in three dimensions: before, while, and after drafting.

Research site was at the academic writing course in English Education Department Postgraduate Program at a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The writing course lasted 1.5 hour-synchronous sessions and 1-hour asynchronous session once a week for 14 weeks and aimed at enabling the student-writers to gain competences in developing and creating several essay genres. The participant pool was 70 university student-writers from the first semester who registered and regularly attended the course. Until the end of the course, however, only 38 participants filled out the online writing strategy inventory as well as submitted the essays and completed the task requirements on Google Classroom. They were 23 females and 15 males with the age ranged between 22-49 years old. They speak Bahasa Indonesia as their first/second language.
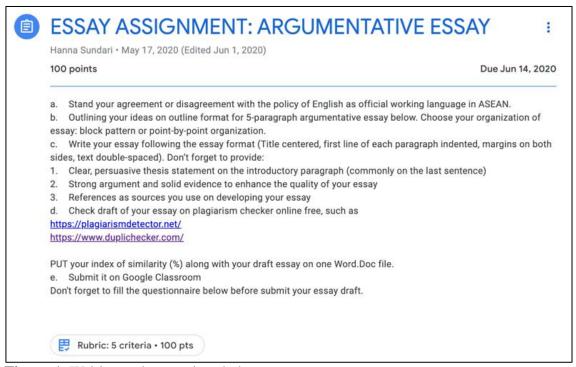
Figure 1. Writing task on a virtual class

For data collection, multiple data sources were carried out to get a deeper understanding on what writing strategies the participants used in preparing and drafting the argumentative essays, , and improving its quality. A writing test was assigned to develop one argumentative essay with a given topic as one of writing tasks during the course (see figure 1). For scoring and grading, scoring rubric for essays from Oshima and Hogue (2006) was used to assess the students' essays in five criteria: format, mechanics, content, organization, grammar and sentence structure. The scores were then consulted to CEFR level default scores (Jiménez-Muñoz, 2014). Moreover, the scale of reports and essays from CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) was adopted to confirm the leveling and scoring of the students' essays and the scores.

To obtain the data of the writing strategy use, online inventory was distributed to the participants after essay submission. The inventory was modified from Strategy Inventory for Integrated Writing (Yang & Plakans, 2012) that covers three dimensions of drafting: before drafting (16 statements), while drafting (14 statements), and after drafting (6 statements). Furthermore, to confirm data trustworthiness and consistency, an online questionnaire was to gather the participants' perceptions and strategy in developing argumentative essay In a phase of data analysis, the gathered data from writing test and inventory were divided into several levels based on the CEFR levels (A1-C2) and the writers' strategy use (before, while, and after). They were then analyzed descriptively in the form of numbers and text referred to the levels and scores of the students' essays.

Level	Default Score
C2	100
C1.2	90
C1.1	80
B2.2	70
B2.1	60
B1.2	50
B1.1	40
A2.2	30
A2.1	20
A1.2	10
A1.1	5

Figure 2. CEFR level scores (Jiménez-Muñoz, 2014)

4. Findings and discussion

This paper reported writing strategy used by the university student-writers in drafting and preparing their argumentative essays during EFL virtual writing course. Students' essay and responses on the writers' strategy inventory were collected during a virtual academic writing course.

Table 2

Students' writing scores.

Levels	Descriptors	Scores	Student Essay
C1.1/ C1.2	Can produce clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues. Can expand and support points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples.	90 80	9 14
B2.2	Can produce an essay or report which develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail.	70	14
B2.1	Can produce an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Can synthesize information and arguments from a number of sources.	60	1

From the student-writers' essays, it was found that their CEFR levels were ranged from B2.1 to C1.2 and the scores were between 60 and 90 (see Table 2). One student was on level B2.1 and gained the lowest scores of all. However, the essays were mostly on B2 and C1 levels. It may indicate that the most of student-writers can produce argumentative essays with appropriate organization and solid supportive arguments.

Concerning to the use of writing strategy, it was divided into three dimensions: before drafting, while drafting, and after drafting. At the stage of before drafting the essay, student-writers in all levels of writing applied rereading the task requirement, trying to understand the type of essay and its organization, and searching for valid

references and evidence with 100% percentage. Meanwhile, student-writers with level C1.2 learned much from sample texts and lecture by summarizing ideas, analyzing sentences and contents as well as planning their writing with 100% on percentage. Moreover, student-writers in all levels were found to avoid copy good sentences from the sample texts and lecture (see Table 3). It may indicate that they try not to fall into plagiarism due to maintaining the quality of their essays.

Table 3
Students' writing strategy before drafting.

No.	Before I started writing the argumentative essay...	Level B2.1 (n: 1)	Level B2.2 (n: 14)		Level C1.1 (n: 14)		Level C1.2 (n: 9)	
			YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
1	I reread the task requirements carefully	Yes	100%		100%		100%	
2	I thought about the type of essay I wanted to write	Yes	100%		100%		100%	
3	I tried to summarize overall ideas from the whole sample texts in my mind	Yes	93%		86%		100%	
4	I wrote down keywords from what I heard in the lecture	Yes	93%		79%		89%	11%
5	I tried to understand the relationship between the ideas of reading materials and the lecture	Yes	100%		100%		100%	
6	I tried to memorize some ideas from the lecture	Yes	93%		100%		89%	11%
7	I made a writing plan (e.g., outline, note, keyword)	Yes	93%		86%		100%	
8	I wrote down main ideas and important points from reading materials (sample texts)	Yes	93%		79%		89%	11%
9	I searched for connections among sentences on sample texts the argumentative essay	Yes	86%		79%		100%	
10	I tried to understand the content according to how information is organized in each paragraph on the sample texts	Yes	100%		93%		100%	
11	I tried to understand the organization of the sample texts	Yes	100%		100%		100%	
12	I summarized ideas from the lecture in my mind	Yes	93%		86%		100%	
13	I searched for connections among paragraphs on the sample texts	Yes	100%		86%		89%	11%
14	I planned to copy good sentences from the sample texts or lecture in my writing	Yes	65%		50%		67%	32%
15	I predicted the content of the lecture after reading the sample text	Yes	93%		72%		100%	
16	I searched for valid references and solid evidence to my argumentative essay	Yes	100%		100%		100%	

At the stage of drafting the essay, the majority student-writers with level C1.1 and C1.2 admitted that they double checked their writing in the terms of task requirements, the use of sentences and paraphrases, rereading sample texts and what they have written, trying to give solid, valid arguments, and revising it over time. With the lowest percentage, only 65%-67% of them showed that they write the first draft and some ideas

from what they read on writing template. On the other hand, student-writer with level B2.1 stated that some strategies were not applied when drafting the essay, such as writing some phrases, providing references and solid argument, and rereading what have written.

Table 4

Students' writing strategy while drafting.

No.	While I was writing my argumentative essay...	Level B2.1 (n: 1)	Level B2.2 (n: 14)		Level C1.1 (n: 14)		Level C1.2 (n: 9)	
			YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
1	I double-checked to see if my writing met the task requirements	Yes	93%		93%		100%	
2	I reread the sample texts to look for main ideas	Yes	93%		93%		89%	
3	I wrote some phrases based on a writing template I had memorized before writing the argumentative essay	No	86%		86%		67%	
4	I thought about mentioning some references in my argumentative essay	No	100%		93%		78%	
5	I copied the sentences from the references I got and paraphrased/revised them	No	86%		72%		89%	
6	I reread what I have written to see if my writing met the task requirements	No	100%		100%		100%	
7	I tried to write about my knowledge or my own experience on the essay	Yes	93%		100%		89%	
8	I used different words or phrases to describe ideas	No	79%		100%		100%	
9	I reread what I have written to see if I was using correct English (e.g. grammar, spelling)	No	100%		100%		100%	
10	I checked if I used the same phrases or sentences as the sample texts	No	79%		93%		89%	
11	I revised the sentences to make my writing clearer	Yes	93%		100%		100%	
12	I thought about a word, phrase, or sentences before I wrote it down	No	93%		100%		100%	
13	I first wrote out a writing template I had memorized before and filled some ideas from the lecture or sample texts.	No	93%		65%		67%	
14	I tried to provide strong argument and solid evidence on my argumentative essay	No	93%		100%		100%	

At the stage of after drafting the essay, it should be a moment before task submission and the last chance to use writing strategies to improve the quality of their essay. From the inventory, it showed that student-writers in three levels (B2.2, C1.1, and C1.2) reported that they use some strategies in this stage with percentage between 93%-100%. They stated that they checked the evidence on the essay, reread the content and grammar, made some changes to ensure of no plagiarism. Moreover, not all of them admitted adding new points based on the sample texts, references, and the lecture on their essays, with percentage 93%, 86%, and 78% respectively. In contrast, the student-writers with the lowest level showed to tick 'No' to several statement. It indicated that

some strategies were not conducted, for example checking evidence, rereading the essay, and making changes on the content.

Table 5

Students' writing strategy after drafting.

No.	After I had finished a draft of my argumentative writing ...	Level B2.1 (n: 1)	Level B2.2 (n: 14)		Level C1.1 (n: 14)		Level C1.2 (n: 9)	
			YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
1	I checked if I used evidence to support my ideas	No	100%		100%		100%	
2	I reread my essay and changed the content that didn't express what I meant	Yes	100%		100%		100%	
3	I added new points based on the sample texts, references and the lecture	Yes	93%		86%		78%	22%
4	I reread my essay and made sure my English was correct	No	100%		100%		100%	
5	I checked if I had connected the ideas from the lecture/sample texts to my writing	No	100%		93%		100%	
6	I made changes to in phrases to ensure I didn't copy the exact phrases to avoid plagiarism	No	100%		100%		100%	

As a writing learner, student-writer applies some techniques when composing a text to improve writing skill and to produce high quality texts. The findings in the present study demonstrated that at the stage of before drafting the essay, all student-writers reread task requirement and searched for valid references. Moreover, level C1.2 student-writers also summarized ideas, analyzed sentences and contents, and made writing plan. These are consistent to the result of the study by Apridayani et al., (2021). They found that Thai EFL writing learners apply cognitive strategies (i.e., use of linking words to ensure logical relationships between sentences/paragraphs) and metacognitive strategies (i.e., reviewing task requirement, looking at writing samples, writing down ideas before writing, and revising two or more times) in high levels of frequency use. furthermore, that a writing plan become one of writing strategies used by student-writers in this research also supports the previous study by (Al-Shaer, 2014) in which demonstrated that mapping the topic as pre-writing strategy has helped the student-writers focus on concepts, logical ideas and organization of the essay.

Moreover, on students' essay of level C1.1 and C1.2, the student-writer in the current study mostly use writing strategy, such as double checking the requirement, revising the essay, rereading the essay and the sample texts, and providing valid arguments when drafting the essay. In contrast, student-writer with lowest level was found not used those strategies. At the of after drafting, student-writers in all levels applied several writing strategies, for instance checking the evidence, rereading the content and grammar, making some changes to ensure of no plagiarism. However, not all of them added new points from sample texts, references, and lecture. To the student-writer with the lowest level, several writing strategies were not used, such as checking

evidence, rereading the essay, and making changes on the content. It is in the line with what is stated by De Silva (2015). The instruction of writing strategy gives positive effect on writing performance, and the students could be trained to use writing strategy effectively.

From the present study, it was found that the use of writing strategy was various across different levels in which tend to the more the use of writing strategy, the higher level of the quality of the students' essays. However, we can see that the findings from previous different research were poles apart. A study shows no significant differences between writing strategy by the low and the high writing achievers; meanwhile some another study proved that students using heavily on metacognitive strategy (i.e., planning, monitoring the writing progress) performed better than those who relied on cognitive strategy (Apridayani et al., 2021).

Moreover, on students' essay of level C1.1 and C1.2, the student-writer in the current study mostly use writing strategy, such as double checking the requirement, revising the essay, rereading the essay and the sample texts, and providing valid arguments when drafting the essay. In contrast, student-writer with lowest level was found not used those strategies. At the of after drafting, student-writers in all levels applied several writing strategies, for instance checking the evidence, rereading the content and grammar, making some changes to ensure of no plagiarism. However, not all of them added new points from sample texts, references, and lecture. To the student-writer with the lowest level, several writing strategies were not used, such as checking evidence, rereading the essay, and making changes on the content.

5. Conclusion

This current research explored the writing strategy used by EFL university student-writers in composing argumentative essay in a virtual academic writing course. The use of strategy was divided into three stages: before, while, and after drafting. Meanwhile, the student-writers' product essays were categorized into four levels. The findings show that before drafting the essay, all student-writers reread task requirement and understood the type of essay and organization, searched for valid references, and tried to avoid plagiarism. At this stage, level C1.2 student-writers also summarized ideas, analyzed sentences and contents, and made writing plan.

The writing strategy at the stage of drafting the essay was various across levels. At level C1.1 and C1.2, double checking the requirement, revising the essay, rereading the essay and the sample texts, and providing valid arguments were the most used strategies when drafting the essay. In contrast, student-writer with lowest level was found not used those strategies. At the final stage or after drafting, student-writers in all levels applied several writing strategies, for instance checking the evidence, rereading the content and grammar, making some changes to ensure of no plagiarism. However, not all of them added new points from sample texts, references, and lecture. To the student-writer with the lowest level, several writing strategies were not used, such as checking evidence,

rereading the essay, and making changes on the content.

The findings may show that higher level student-writers have more writing awareness to apply writing strategy during drafting their essays. It is believed that the more writing strategies used during drafting the essay, the more score and the higher quality of the essay was possibly achieved. Therefore, it is highly advisable for writing faculties/instructors to design an instruction of writing strategy across levels. Eventually, for further research, the investigations on specific writing strategy for specific text type and its effectiveness may lead to clearer understanding in the field of writing strategy and its implementation.

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