

EFL Vocational High School Students' Challenges in Writing Thesis Statements: Problems and Contributing Factors



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ABSTRACT

Thesis statement is important in producing analytical exposition texts. However, many EFL vocational high school students encounter several problems in developing a thesis statement. This study aims to identify the problems experienced by tenth-grade students while writing thesis statements and to investigate the underlying factors causing to these problems. A qualitative case study approach was used in this study, involving students majoring in Electrical Engineering at a public vocational high school in Surabaya, Indonesia. Data were collected through document analysis from thirty students' thesis statement and semi-structured interviews with six students. The findings revealed several common problems, particularly in formulating arguable claims, identifying clear subjects and contexts, and applying correct grammar and mechanics. Frequent errors included the use of non-debatable claims and incorrect capitalization. Contributing factors included students' limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge, low motivation, negative attitudes toward English, lack of practice, time constraints, and lack of feedback from teachers. These results suggest the need for more focused instruction and practice in writing thesis statements.

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INTRODUCTION

As one of the productive skills, writing has an essential social and educational purpose and its status has a high social prestige, particularly for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learner (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Toba et al., 2019). In academic contexts, writing requires technical, instructional, rhetorical, linguistic, disciplinary, as well as cultural elements in producing a well-written text (Wette, 2020). However, writing essays in Indonesian EFL context has several types of text. As one of the types, analytical exposition text elaborates the author's perspective about an issue to convince readers that the topic is immensely important to discuss and it is arranged in a well-organized (Anderson & Anderson, 1997). A key component of analytical exposition texts is the thesis statement, which represents the entire text and indicates the author's main argument to provide direction, focus, and boundaries in the development of arguments (Miller & Pessoa, 2016). A strong thesis statement is crucial to guide both the writer and the reader in understanding the purpose and direction of the text (Lai et al., 2019; Lapum et al., 2019).

However, problems in formulating a thesis statement can weaken the clarity and persuasiveness of a text (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, the ability to write a thesis statement properly is important before

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writing a complete text, especially for EFL vocational high school students because even though they trained more intensively in practical skills, they still expected to have learning materials on writing analytical exposition with a good structure, including a proper thesis statement (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Kusheva, 2022). Beyond academic purposes, this skill is valuable in professional contexts, where students need to write reports, proposals, or technical documents that require clarity, focus, and persuasive communication. This highlights the need for targeted writing instruction that addresses both the academic and practical needs of vocational students.

Several studies have highlighted common student problems in writing thesis statements, such as unclear argumentation, misunderstanding prompts, and lack of writing interest (Hadiani, 2017; Nurlatifah & Yusuf, 2022). Moreover, grammatical and mechanical issues further hinder students' ability to write coherent and convincing thesis statements (Mabuan, 2020; Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Beyond linguistic difficulties, cognitive and instructional factors also contribute significantly. Students often struggle due to lack of background knowledge, insufficient writing practice, limited motivation, time constraints, and inadequate teacher feedback (Alfaki, 2015; Toba et al., 2019). These issues reflect the complexity of writing across various educational contexts, where academic writing tends to receive less emphasis than practical skills. This indicates that difficulties in writing thesis statements represent a global issue in vocational education.

While several researchers have delved into the students' problems in thesis statements, there remains a notable gap in understanding the factors that cause the problem. Furthermore, earlier research has largely focused on university students rather than those in vocational students. This gap is significant, as vocational students typically receive limited exposure to academic writing instruction, which may intensify their difficulties in producing well-constructed thesis statements. Despite these challenges, limited research has explored the problems and contributing factors faced by vocational high school EFL students in Indonesia, particularly in writing thesis statements for analytical exposition texts. A clearer understanding of these issues can inform more targeted instructional strategies, enhance teacher feedback practices, and support students in developing stronger academic writing skills. To fill this gap, the current research aims to explore both the problems encountered and the factors contributing to those problems in writing thesis statements among tenth-grade vocational high school students in the EFL context. This study offers insights to help teachers and students address and avoid problems in writing thesis statements of academic essays.

METHODS

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' problems in constructing thesis statements and the factors underlying these difficulties. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth examination of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes within a specific educational context (Lichtman, 2023). The case study design enables the investigation of a bounded group of vocational high school students, allowing the researcher to capture the complexity of writing challenges as they occur in real classroom settings. In line with Cohen et al. (2018), this approach supports the exploration of educational phenomena holistically by integrating multiple data sources. Consequently, the analysis focuses on interpreting patterns and insights derived from authentic student outputs and interview data.

Participants

The participants for this study were 30 tenth-grade students chosen purposively to represent a range of experiences in composing such texts. The researcher used one class because, out of a total of 92 students across three classes, that particular class showed more problems in writing essays based on the English teacher and the grades obtained during previous learning. The setting of the current research was a public vocational high school in Surabaya, Indonesia. The school was conveniently located and the researcher had established a professional relationship with the school, supported

smooth coordination and data collection process. From a legal standpoint, the school provided formal approval to conduct the research, expressed no objections regarding data collection, and confirmed that no similar studies had previously been carried out at the site.

Data Collection

This study employed two sources of data: students' written thesis statements and verbal data obtained through semi-structured interviews. The written data consisted of 30 thesis statements produced by tenth-grade students in an Electrical Engineering class. This class was purposively selected based on the English teacher's evaluation and students' prior writing performance, which indicated greater difficulty in essay writing compared to other classes. Data were collected after students had completed instruction on analytical exposition texts, ensuring their familiarity with the concept of thesis statements.

The analysis of written data was guided by a thesis statement rubric adapted from Moore and Cassel (2011), focusing on key components such as context, subject, and claim, as well as linguistic features including grammar and mechanics based on Deane et al. (2008). In addition, a coding scheme was developed to categorize common error types across these aspects. To complement the document analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students representing high, middle, and low proficiency levels, selected based on rubric scores and teacher recommendations. The interview protocol, adapted from Alfaki (2015), consisted of six guiding questions addressing factors influencing students' writing difficulties. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, lasted five to ten minutes, and were audio-recorded with consent.

Both instruments were reviewed by an expert in English education, yielding validation scores indicating good quality. The combination of these instruments enabled methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings.

Data Analysis

In this study, documents from students' writing assignments and interview transcripts were analyzed. The researcher applied the three steps of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles & Huberman (1994) consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the data reduction stage, students' thesis statements were analyzed using the rubric assessing the elements of thesis statement (context, subject, and claim), mechanics, and grammar, while writing errors were categorized using a pre-developed coding book to identify common patterns. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather insights into students' experiences, with probing questions encouraging elaboration on cognitive difficulties, motivation, and instructional influences. The transcribed responses were coded and analyzed alongside the thesis statements. During the data display stage, the researcher examined the data by presenting in tables to highlight key problems and contributing factors. In the conclusion drawing or verification stage, the researcher interpreted the displayed data from both sources to draw conclusions and verify the results, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by vocational high school EFL students in writing thesis statements.

Ethics

From a legal standpoint, the school provided formal approval (research permit letter) to conduct the research, confirmed that no similar studies had previously been carried out at the site. Before data collection, all participants were informed about the research's purpose and their roles. To ensure confidentiality, students' identities were anonymized using codes such as S1, S2, and so forth. In addition, member checking was carried out to allow participants to confirm the accuracy of their interview responses. These procedures ensured that ethical principles, such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and data confidentiality, were rigorously maintained throughout the study.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The Students' Problems in Writing Thesis Statement

In assessing students' texts, there were two raters (the researcher and an English teacher) who assessed the students' texts. To elaborate on the students' problems, the raters (R1 and R2) classified the problems using the coding book. The table below outlines the specific problem types across each aspect, as determined through discussion with the English teacher.

Table 1. *Frequency and Types of Errors in Students' Thesis Statements*

Aspect	Problem Categories	Frequency	
Context	Too Broad – present too broad context	12	
	Too Broad – present too broad subject	10	
Subject	Too Vague – present too vague subject	14	
	Self-evident – states too general ideas; lacks a clear and assertive stance	18	
Claim	Statement of Fact – presents an indisputable fact; cannot be debated	24	
	Statement of Summary – summarizes the topic without an interpretation or argument	9	
	Statement of A Plan – announces the plan	1	
	Grammar	Run-on Sentence – independent clauses without proper punctuation or conjunctions	5
		Article – omission or addition of “a”, “an”, or “the”	2
Subject-Verb Agreement – misuse of subject/verb agreement		2	
Verb tense – misuse of verb tenses		1	
Preposition – misuse, omission, or addition of preposition		2	
Verb – omission of the verb; confusion for verb choice		1	
Morphology – omission and addition of plural “s”; redundant; incorrect form		2	
Informal Expression – casual word: slang; contraction; colloquial		8	
Mechanics		Spelling – incorrect arrangement of letter; misspelled word	9
		Punctuation – misuse, omission, or overuse of punctuation mark	10
	Capitalization – incorrect use of uppercase letter	34	

Based on the table, it revealed that vocational students experienced several problems in writing thesis statements for their analytical exposition texts. In aspect of context, several students tended to present overly broad background information, making their statements less focused. The subject aspect revealed two main issues, such as subjects that were either too broad or too vague, which hindered clarity and direction in their essays. The claim aspect showed the highest frequency of problems,

especially in the form of self-evident claims, statement of fact, and statement of summary, indicating students' problems in constructing arguable claims. In terms of grammar, the most common errors were informal expressions, followed by minor mistakes such as subject-verb agreement, article usage, and verb tense. Lastly, in the mechanics aspect, capitalization errors were the most frequent, alongside issues with punctuation and spelling, showing that many students still struggle with basic writing conventions. Furthermore, the ranking of error types experienced by the students is presented in the table below.

Table 2. *Number of Students Experiencing Problems in Each Aspect*

Aspect	Number of Students	Rank
Context	13	4
Subject	14	3
Claim	28	1
Grammar	12	5
Mechanics	18	2

The table above present calculated findings derived from the students' error analysis of problems across five key aspects of thesis statement writing. The number of students were established through agreement with the English teacher. The data indicate that the claim aspect was the most significant problem, indicating that many students struggled to formulate clear, arguable, and well-supported claims. This was followed by difficulties in mechanics, particularly in punctuation and spelling. In addition, several students encountered problems in identifying an appropriate subject and presenting a relevant context. Among all aspects, grammar was found to be the least problematic, suggesting relatively better student performance in this area.

The Factor Causing Students' Problems in Writing Thesis Statement

To explore the factors contributing to students' difficulties in writing thesis statements, interviews were conducted with six participants representing low, middle, and high scorers based on a scoring rubric and teacher recommendations. Specifically, Student 8 and Student 29 represented the lowest scorers; Student 5 and Student 18 represented the middle range; and Student 14 and Student 30 were the highest scorers. The following are students' views regarding the cause of thesis statement writing problems.

Table 3. *Causes of Students' Problems in Writing Thesis Statement*

Factor	Cause	Frequency
Low Nature of Writing	Linguistic Difficulties	4
	Negative Perception of English Writing	5
	Translation Difficulties (Thinking in L1)	3
Low Motivation	Lack of Interest	4
	Feel Lazy	4
Inadequate Time	Time Pressure	6
	Limited Writing Preparation	3
Writing Practice	Write English Only When Required	5
	Dislike for Academic Writing Rules	2
Teacher's Feedback	Fast Pace Explanation	3
	Lack of Sufficient Examples Given	4

Based on the interview results table above, there are several aspects that underlie students' writing problems which are focused on the five factors that cause writing problems. First, inadequate time, particularly the time pressure, emerged as the most frequently mentioned issue, reported by all six participants. Second, low nature of writing, including the negative perception of English as a difficult language and linguistic difficulties (vocabulary and grammar), was reported by five students. Third, low motivation to write was also common, with five students expressing a lack of interest for

writing, often describing it as time-consuming and unenjoyable. Fourth, lack of writing practice emerged as another factor, with all six students stating that they only write when required for assignments. Some students mentioned that rigid academic writing rules made them uneasy, further limiting their engagement in regular practice. Furthermore, five students highlighted insufficient teacher feedback, including limited examples given and overly fast explanation.

Discussion

The Students' Problems in Writing Thesis Statement

The data analysis revealed that vocational students experienced multiple problems in writing thesis statements as part of their analytical exposition texts. The error analysis shows a total of 158 mistakes distributed across eighteen problem categories. Based on the combined scores from both raters, students experienced at least one problem in writing their thesis statements. The most frequently identified problem was in the aspect of claim, followed by mechanics, subject, context, and the last is grammar. These findings indicate that the challenges faced by students involve deeper conceptual issues related to content construction and academic writing conventions. This is similar with Hadiani, (2017), Knowles (2022), and Miller & Pessoa (2016) as they stated in their study that the primary problems were with the linguistic aspects and how the ideas were presented.

The claim aspect recorded the highest frequency of errors. The most dominant problems within this category were statement of fact and self-evident claim. These types of claims do not fulfil the argumentative purpose of a thesis statement because they do not express a clear, debatable stance. This result supports the findings of Moore & Cassel (2011), which stated that formulating a strong claim is often the most difficult part of thesis statement writing, as it requires students to take a position and construct an assertion that invites counterargument. The results showed that rather than asserting an argument, these students tend to describe what their essay will do or simply repeat background information, which fails to establish a focused line of reasoning. Knowles (2022) and Miller & Pessoa, (2016) support these findings, noting that students tend to face challenges in writing thesis statements, as they often present underdeveloped arguments, struggle to organize their ideas, and take a clear writing position.

Furthermore, problems in mechanics and grammar were the second most frequent. The most notable issue in this category was capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. These errors may indicate a lack of attention to detail or inadequate mastery of writing conventions. It is similar to the research by Mahmudah (2022) which found that capitalization is the most common writing error made by high school students. According to Heaton (1993), while these errors may seem minor, they can severely affect the clarity of a student's writing, especially in academic contexts where accuracy is essential. In addition, the findings show that grammar-related problems, though individually less frequent, are varied and 63 persistent. Unlike Hadiani (2017), which identified grammar as the main problem encountered by students, the current study shows that grammar is a less frequent error.

In addition to claim-related problems, students also struggled with identifying clear subjects and contexts for their thesis statements. The subject aspect included overly broad and vague subject, while the context aspect showed that many students failed to narrow their background information. It supports Langan (2001) who stated that presents the subject and context in too short way make the writer difficult to develop a compelling argument. These issues suggest that students lack skills in topic narrowing and specificity, which are essential for developing a strong argumentative framework. The findings of the current study are in line with Salmiati et al. (2024), which indicated that students struggled with specificity when formulating their thesis statements.

The Factor Causing Students' Problems in Writing Thesis Statement

The interview findings revealed the factors affecting students' problems in writing thesis statements in analytical exposition text based on students' perceptions are inadequate time, linguistic and psychological barriers, lack of motivation, lack of practice, and teacher's feedback. These align

with previous studies Budjalemba & Listyani (2020) emphasizing linguistic, affective, and instructional approaches as key barriers in EFL academic writing.

Among these, inadequate time as the most frequently cited factor. Students struggled under time pressure and lacked sufficient preparation in writing thesis statement since it requires clarity and focus. This supports Hayes's (1996) cognitive model of writing that emphasizes the importance of time and planning in producing coherent texts. Similarly, Ramadhani (2024) & Sa'adah et al. (2022) found that limited time in writing assessments increases student anxiety and hinders their ability to express ideas clearly. These are the same as this finding that writing in a limited time can make them pressured.

Linguistic and psychological barriers were also significant. The nature of writing and other language-related challenges also played the significant factors. This aligns with Richard & Renandya (2002), who assert that linguistic and psychological readiness are crucial in successful writing. Students who have negative perception, lack linguistic confidence, and lack of knowledge about English academic writing tend to be lacks in developing ideas (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Nurlatifah & Yusuf, 2022). In addition, idea transference from First Language (L1) or translation difficulties further complicate the writing process (Muhammed & Ameen, 2014; Pasaribu et al., 2024). It corresponds with Hadiani (2017), which found that grammatical competence is the factor of students' difficulties in writing thesis statement.

Lack of motivation and practice further compounded the problems. The findings support the previous research conducted by Toba et al. (2019) which said that students with low engagement and frequency in writing practice is the factor of students' problems in writing. This aligns with Adebayo et al. (2024) who emphasizes that regular writing practice plays a crucial role in improving students' writing competence. Therefore, when students write infrequently, they are less likely to build confidence or refine their skills, which in turn leads to increased errors and hesitation in the writing process.

The teacher's role also influenced students' performance, particularly fast-paced explanation, insufficient examples, and monotonous delivery, is another factor contributing to students' problems in writing. The findings indicated even though feedback may be given, it is not always be effectively internalized by students. This aligns with the findings of Ceylan (2019) and Darmawan (2022), who reported that students often receive inadequate feedback, make it difficult for them to improve their writing. Therefore, teachers should ensure that their feedback is clear and understandable for students.

However, beyond the findings of the present study, several previous studies have reported different results. Salmiati et al. (2024) revealed that students struggled to begin writing their thesis statements due to a lack of ideas. In addition, regarding the causative factors, a study by Hadiani (2017) found that the primary cause of students' problems was limited grammatical competence.

Based on the findings and discussions, it is advisable for teachers take several steps to address students' problems in writing thesis statements. These includes providing explicit instruction on how to construct a good thesis statement, particularly emphasizing the characteristics of strong and debatable claims. Moreover, issues related to subject and context suggest the need for scaffolding techniques that support students in narrowing down topics and establishing relevant background information. Teachers also need to address the underlying factors contributing to students' problems, which may be resolved through more interactive, student-centered approaches, and formative assessment strategies that allow students to revise their work based on clear teacher feedback. By incorporating these considerations, writing instruction can become more responsive to students' needs and promote deeper learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined thesis statement writing problems experienced by tenth-grade vocational high school students in Surabaya, Indonesia. Most students experienced at least one problem, with contributing factors including time pressure, negative perceptions of English writing, and infrequent

writing practice. These findings are in line with previous research that highlights the role of linguistic competence, psychological readiness, and instructional support in EFL students' writing. To address these challenges, teachers should provide explicit instruction on constructing strong, debatable claims and offer scaffolding strategies to help students narrow topics and build relevant context. Interactive, student-centered teaching and formative feedback can also support students in revising and improving their writing. Additionally, teachers should allocate sufficient time for students to explore topics in depth, allowing them to produce detailed content that demonstrates the linguistic features of the text. To be able to make a greater contribution to all parties in the field of education, future researchers are expected to be able to involve larger and more diverse samples to enhance result generalizability. The aim is to guide English learners and help them to find the best ways to overcome their writing problems. Students also require further guidance and sufficient time to explore the topic in depth, allowing them to produce more detailed content that contains linguistic features of argumentative written discourse with consistency and precision.

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