A Case Study of Analyzing Students' Focus in Writing

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A B S T R A C T

Maintaining focus in writing is among the underemphasized but critical areas of academic literacy, particularly among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Indonesian EFL learners mostly put more effort into maintaining thematic coherence and logical coherence of writing despite their operationally effective grammatical and lexical control. Although writing pedagogy is a stronghold of language instruction, little has been investigated in Indonesia which seeks to investigate students' capacity to maintain focus, a fundamental skill in guaranteeing coherent and effective texts. This research was prompted by the noted lack of pedagogical focus and empirical investigation of focus in writing, and particularly at the tertiary level. Using a qualitative case study design, the researcher examined the writing of 25 second-semester business management students. Participants were tasked with composing personal narratives and reflecting on their writing experiences. After that, the students' writings were evaluated based on five criteria, such as clarity of main idea, relevance of supporting details, consistency, topic unity, transitions and coherence. Findings reveal that the majority of students demonstrated Limited to Basic proficiency in all five areas with the highest deficiencies observed in topic unity and consistency. Also, most of the students can write sentences but struggle to organize and connect the ideas logically correspond to the theme. The data also shows that the participants faced significant linguistic and cognitive challenges, such in expressing ideas fluently, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and understanding genre-based writing. This study underscores the urgent need for a pedagogical shift that adopt a process-based which constructivist approaches that view writing as a repeated activity involving planning, drafting, reviewing, and revising. Such an approach recognizes that effective writing instruction must extend beyond grammatical correctness and surface-level features..

I. Introduction

Writing has historically been taught as a product-oriented skill with a focus on syntax and vocabulary. However, new pedagogical trends advocate for a process-oriented approach that includes planning, drafting, revising, and editing as necessary phases [1], [2]. Writing is an essential ability in academic settings that require writers to express their ideas effectively and coherently. Moreover, effective writing not only improves communication but also promotes critical thinking and creativity [3]. Within this process, being focused while writing is essential for guiding the writer in arranging ideas into a good text [4]. Writing is an essential ability in academic settings that require students to express their ideas in writing effectively and coherently. Effective

writing not only improves communication but also promotes critical thinking and creativity [3], [4], [5]. Furthermore, understanding the writing process presents students with the required tools to master diverse writing genres, resulting in enhanced academic performance and self-expression.

In writing, maintaining focus is critical for coherence and clarity which allows the writer to effectively convey their ideas and arguments to the reader [4]. Maintaining focus not only helps to explain concepts but also improves the general structure and strength of academic writing. In this application, focus refers to a writer's ability to stick to a major idea or theme while also ensuring that all supporting ideas, instances, and arguments are logically consistent with it [6]. This arrangement is critical for developing cohesive and coherent writing, which improves the effectiveness of students' writing ability. It guarantees that each paragraph, sentence, and example is related to the text. Effective focus in writing not only improves clarity but also builds a deeper connection with the audience, making ideas more appealing and easier to understand [4], [5].

A good text consists of clear topics that correspond to the theme, develops the text logically, and maintains thematic coherence throughout the text [7]. However, this ability remains one of the most difficult for students, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) settings. Students might be proficient in grammar, vocabulary, and fundamental paragraph organization but many fail to maintain a coherent argument or narrative. Moreover, some students might write text that is mechanically correct but thematically disjointed, lacking the consistency essential for academic achievement.

Secondly, writing assignments are typically considered exercises that concentrate on the mechanics of language, such as sentence structure, grammar correctness, and spelling and not intricate processes that attempt meaning-construction [8]. This product-oriented approach does not equip the learners with skills to actually organize, plan, and enhance their writing, thereby hindering them from being able to maintain focus [9]. The difficulty is exacerbated by the vagueness that follows the definitions and assessments of focus [9]. Most rubrics feature such terms as organization or coherence is seldom defined in aspects that will help students to maintain focus in their writing [10]. Consequently, surface characteristics, like sentence structure, grammar, and spelling, are often stressed at the expense of more intangible ones, such as concept development, logical flow, and consistency of concentration. Writing assignments are commonly perceived as individual effort aimed at linguistic form, as opposed to multifaceted processes of meaning making [11]. This product-based perspective does not equip students with the tools to effectively plan, organize, and enhance their writing, thereby ignoring uninterrupted focus on their writing [9].

Furthermore, for most students, a problem is encountered in sustaining this focus and the writing thereby generated is disjointed, rambling, or incoherent [12]. This is particularly revealed in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language) settings, where students are struggling with the confusion of linguistic correctness. Then, in multilingual classrooms, students' writing may demonstrate rhetorical conventions from their native languages [13]. These norms could be different from the linear, argument-based norms typically encountered in academic English writing. Therefore, teachers could account for what appears to be a lack of focus as perhaps being a result of cross-cultural rhetorical traditions or a lack of exposure to academic culture. Students tend to lose focus not for lack of ideas but for lack of how to organize and rank the ideas effectively within a coherent framework [14]. Numerous classroom observations indicate that students usually start writing with a definite idea but get lost along the way [15], [16]. This could be a result of ineffective planning, a lack of familiarity with paragraph organization, or insufficient contact with well-focused writing.

The other problem concerns students' lack of metacognitive awareness [17]. Effective writing requires ongoing self-monitoring [18]. However, most students are unpracticed with such activities as outlining, reviewing, or revising with reference to the ideas. In the absence of these activities, the student can write reactively, adding ideas as they arise without assurance that they will further the overall purpose. Studies in writing development have found that more proficient writers go through repetitive steps, such as outlining, reviewing, and revising their work repeatedly to maintain focus. These are not technological issues but pedagogical issue [19]. So, solving the issues of focus in writing is important not just for better student writing but for the development of larger skills like critical thinking, argumentation, and clear communication [20].

Moreover, the worth of writing as an essential university skill has been much discussed in second language acquisition and composition research. In general speaking, focus in writing has been a necessary but often overlooked realm of inquiry. The literature suggests that while most students achieve grammatical and lexical competence, they tend to struggle with maintaining thematic coherence and logical development at the paragraph level [21], [22]. This lack can significantly reduce the clarity, persuasiveness, and academic value of student writing. To study and analyze students' focus in writing, this study employs a multi-theoretical paradigm that integrates cognitive theory of writing, metacognitive theory, and models of discourse coherence. These approaches provide an integrated view of how students build and demonstrate focus in their written texts.

The first is the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing by Flower and Hayes [23], which considers writing to be an essentially goal-directed and repeated activity. According to their model, writers do plan, translate, and review as they write. Focus on writing is sustained when writers take on explicit rhetorical goals and continuously determine whether their content is accomplishing what they wish it to accomplish. In this perspective, loss of focus is usually brought about by inadequate planning or insufficient reviewing and revising.

The second is metacognitive theory. Metacognition refers to the knowledge and regulation of one's cognitive processes while in writing, metacognitive strategies include planning an outline, self-monitoring, and reflective revision [24]. The strategies enable students to determine whether their ideas are contributing to the overall thesis, thus making the topic of their writing more focused. Students who lack metacognitive awareness might fail to notice when they have drifted away from their subject or added unnecessary material.

The third theoretical approach comes from the theory of discourse coherence and cohesion [25]. These theories are focused on how language features, such as topic sentences, transitions, reference cohesion, and lexical consistency are engaged in the reader's perception of coherence and unity [22], [25], [26]. Through this lens, a focused text is one in which thematic progression is clearly signalled and logically developed, ensuring that all parts of the text work in service of the main idea.

Through bringing these theoretical perspectives together, in this study, focus in writing is thought of as an interactive process involving cognitive planning, strategic self-regulation, and linguistic enactment. Focus is not so much the result of a fixed talent or linguistic capacity but instead becomes constructed through intentional, scaffolded practices that can be learned and utilized. This integrated model supports research on student writing and pedagogical intervention design aimed at building focus in academic writing.

In the context of Indonesian EFL, classroom practice has generally been preoccupied with grammatical and lexicographic features of writing, commonly ignoring more important aspects such as the priority of theme, consistency, and coherence. While writing has been described as an inborn skill, neither practice nor policy has explicit signs about how to stay on task while writing. National writing examinations, such as standardized tests for English proficiency, use broad rubrics that focus on surface features (e.g., grammar, spelling) without deliberately stated descriptors or feedback mechanisms for the evaluation of attention, coherence, or logical structure. Therefore, most Indonesian EFL students cannot keep the central idea intact throughout their writing, producing thematically disjointed writing that is mechanically sound.

Moreover, research on Indonesian students' writing ability has focused predominantly on discreet micro-skills, i.e., sentence building or paragraph structure, ignoring how these elements work together to create cohesive, focused writing. This oversight might suppress overall students' writing ability which requires an holistic attempt to instruct them with these capabilities effectively. This integrated paradigm not only enhances students' understanding of writing as a whole but enhances retention and transfer of language ability from one context to another. Bridging this divide is desirable and can be facilitated by implementing instructional measures that emphasize writing components' interdependence, thereby fostering the development of an extended conception of writing ability. Research has demonstrated that Indonesian language teachers may benefit significantly from training that emphasizes the integration of writing micro-skills, resulting in

enhanced overall writing competency for students and teachers can better help their students create cohesive and effective writings.

II. Method

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore how students maintain focus in their academic writing and to identify the challenges they encounter during the writing process. A case study approach is appropriate because it allows for in-depth analysis of writing behaviours within a real educational context, offering rich insights into both process and product [27]. The design focuses on understanding students' experiences, writing strategies, and areas of difficulty, with particular attention to how they articulate, develop, and sustain a central idea throughout their written work.

Participants of this research involved 25 college students in the second semester of the management business class, and the students were taking English 2 subject. The data collection was conducted in two phases. First, the students were asked to write on the topic given was "An Experience that Changed My Life." Second, finishing writing, the researcher asked the students to write down their feelings while writing and the challenges that they faced while writing. The questions aimed to know the process of their writing. To maintain the originality in writing, students were asked to write freely without using a dictionary or any other translation device. If they faced difficulties while they did not know the English of some words, they were allowed to write the Indonesian language of the word. The students wrote everything freely and expressed everything in written text. All written texts and verbal data were collected with informed consent and anonymized for analysis.

The students' focus on writing was assessed by using a grading rubric. There were five key criteria for analyzing the focus, i.e., clarity of main idea, relevance of supporting details, consistency, topic unity, transitions and coherence. The clarity of the main idea refers to the unambiguity and consistency of the central argument or main thesis. This criterion emphasises the importance of formulating the main idea at the beginning of the text and maintaining it throughout the text. Relevance of supporting details tests whether the supporting arguments are meaningfully and logically connected with the main idea. This ensures a promise that the explanation and evidence are directly contributing to the functioning of the primary theme. Consistency is about the consistency of the content with the main idea in all parts of the text, including the introduction, body, and conclusion. Consistency assesses whether the text has stable and coherent arguments at the paragraph level. This involves checking whether each paragraph is limited to a single sub-topic and does not contain any disjointed information. Topic Unity is the organization at the paragraph level, i.e., whether a paragraph addresses a single sub-topic and not unrelated to the inclusion of irrelevant details. Transitions and Coherence are the forms of transitional devices and the coherence of ideas so that the text progresses smoothly and such that relationships among ideas are well established. Collectively, these criteria are employed as a matrix through which to analyze how well a piece of writing remains focused, grows in argument in favor of its thesis, and becomes cohesive at the paragraph and overall structure levels.

Next, the writings were assessed by using a grading rubric which provide a four-level scale for assessing the degree to which a written text maintains a clear and consistent central idea. Each level represents a qualitative judgment based on clarity, development, relevance of supporting details, and coherence. Level 4 – Excellent describes writing where the central idea is clearly articulated, thoroughly developed, and consistently upheld throughout the piece. Supporting details are highly relevant, and transitions are used effectively to reinforce focus. Level 3 – Proficient indicates that the central idea is generally clear and mostly sustained. While most supporting details align with the main idea, there may be occasional minor lapses in focus. Level 2 – Basic reflects writing in which the central idea is either vague or inconsistently presented. Several supporting points may deviate from the main idea, leading to occasional losses of focus. Level 1 – Limited characterizes writing where the central idea is unclear or entirely absent. The text lacks unity and coherence, and frequently includes off-topic content.

III. Results and Discussion

After analyzing students' writing, the result is presented in table 1. The statistics show clear distinctions in competency across the measured categories, highlighting participants' strengths and areas for improvement. These findings not only reveal which areas of writing are best developed, but also indicate specific abilities that may require additional assistance.

Table 1. Analysis of students' writing

Level	Categories				
	Clarity of Main Idea	Relevance of Supporting Details	Consistency	Topic Unity	Transitions and Coherence
4 – Excellent	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
3 – Proficient	5 (20%)	5 (20%)	4 (16%)	4 (16%)	5 (20%)
2 – Basic	9 (36%)	8 (32%)	7 (28%)	6 (24%)	5 (20%)
1 – Limited	9 (36%)	10 (25%)	12 (48%)	13 (52%)	14 (56%)

The table offers a detailed breakdown of students' writing proficiency about five fundamental aspects, such as; Clarity of Main Idea, Relevance of Supporting Details, Consistency, Topic Unity, and Transitions and Coherence. Each aspect is rated on a four-point scale comprising, such as; Excellent, Proficient, Basic, and Limited, along with corresponding frequencies and percentages. The findings show that a large percentage of the students are showing performance at the lower level, especially in sections that require greater organizational and rhetorical ability.

With regard to clarity of main idea, a significant majority of students (72%) were marked for having Basic (36%) or Limited (36%) levels of proficiency. This result indicates that a significant number of students have difficulties in clearly expressing their main idea or thesis. A strongly asserted central thesis benefits cohesive writing, as it gives the reader a guide to the author's intention. The weaknesses highlighted here reflect a basic shortage of capacity on the students' part to establish and articulate the primary concern of their writing which can be an obstacle to both understanding and interest.

Therefore, the significance of supporting details means that 57% of students are in the Basic and Limited categories. Supporting details play a key role in describing and developing the main idea. Being unable to identify or portray relevant information means that students lack analytical skills or subject knowledge necessary to back up their arguments or stories. These weaknesses commonly lead to writing that is confusing, underdeveloped, or irrelevant, and consequently diminishes its overall effectiveness.

The table shows that nearly 48% of the students were categorized at the Limited level of consistency with an additional 28% in the Basic group. This showed that a total of 76% of students had weak performance in keeping a consistent structure, style, or progression of ideas in their writing. Meanwhile, consistency refers to the logical arrangement and unity of sentences, paragraphs, and the overall text structure. It ensures that the writer's ideas flow easily and reliably which aids reader comprehension. The lack of consistency in students' writing is most often due to poor planning and organizational skills. It may also indicate a lack of comprehension of how to link a central argument or narrative through multiple portions of a text.

Similarly, the table shows that 52% of students scored at the Limited level in Topic Unity while 24% scored Basic. This suggests that more than three-quarters of the pupils struggled to keep thematic focus in their paragraphs. However, topic unity is the alignment of all sentences in a paragraph around the same idea or theme. A good paragraph typically begins with a topic sentence and then continues with supporting sentences that describe or prove that sentence. Student writing often becomes disjointed when students mix various or loosely related ideas together in the same paragraph with no evident topic sentence. This has the effect of making it harder to read and causes the overall coherence and reduce the readability.

Furthermore, these challenges are seen by the findings regarding transitions and coherence where a noticeable 56% of students were assessed Limited and 20% Basic. Transitions are essential for leading the reader through the text and ensuring that ideas flow seamlessly from one to the next. The lack of consistency makes it difficult for readers to follow the logic of the writing, then leaving

the material disjointed and ineffective. These findings have important implications for understanding how students focus on writing. The concentration of low-level results across all five categories indicates that many students are suffering not only with linguistic expression but also with the deeper cognitive and rhetorical processes needed in creating coherent text.

This suggests a lack of metacognitive awareness of writing, as students appear to have difficulty planning, organising and revising their work, paying attention to structure and flow. Consequently, the problem of concentration in writing goes beyond grammar and vocabulary and encompasses broader challenges in writing development such as critical thinking, organisation and audience awareness. To address these issues, educational strategies should focus on the explicit teaching of writing structures, such as the use of outlines, paragraphs, and cohesive also coherent. In addition, increasing the writing process awareness, such as through peer reviews, guided revisions, and self-assessments which can help students become more aware of the clarity, support, and coherence of their writing. Educators can assist students develop not only their written communication skills but also their overall academic literacy.

The students were asked to reflect on their feelings and the specific challenges they encountered during the writing process after completing their writing tasks. The analysis revealed that many students found writing in English to be particularly difficult. While they expressed confidence and ease when writing in their native language, Indonesian, they faced considerable difficulties when required to articulate their thoughts in English. Although they generally had a clear idea of what they wanted to convey, they struggled with how to express those ideas accurately and fluently in written English. This struggle was often attributed to limited recognition and mastery of essential linguistic components.

The challenges which most frequently mentioned by students include grammatical structure (especially tenses), limited vocabulary, difficulties with word choice or diction, confusion with spelling and alphabet usage, and problems with word formation and word mixing. In addition, students pointed out the complexity of translating their ideas from Indonesian into English, which often led to a loss of meaning or clarity. These difficulties reflect broader, systemic issues in English language education for Indonesian learners, especially in the areas of grammar and vocabulary acquisition. As such, the findings point to the urgent need for pedagogical strategies that are explicitly designed to address these areas. Instructional approaches that integrate grammar and vocabulary support within meaningful writing contexts may help students build both linguistic accuracy and expressive capability.

Furthermore, while students were generally able to recount their personal experiences in writing, they often failed to engage in deeper reflection on how those experiences had influenced or transformed them. The students' texts tended to remain descriptive rather than narrative. The students' find difficulty on deciding the genre of their writing. For instance, one student mentioned, "The challenge is to think of the main idea of what I want to write in my paper and to express that with good diction." This comment suggests a broader cognitive gap in synthesizing experiences into coherent. It implies that students may lack the metacognitive skills needed to assess the significance of their experiences and integrate them meaningfully into their writing. In general, these insights point to the importance of fostering both linguistic and reflective competencies to help students achieve greater proficiency and depth in their English writing.

The data in the table above highlights ongoing issues such as maintaining focus and coherence in students' writing. Mostly in the Basic and Limited categories across all writing dimensions reveals not only linguistic deficiencies but also underlying cognitive and organizational problems. These results align with previous studies which have found that numerous English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students struggle to balance surface-level language control with higher-order skills, such as idea development, logical sequencing, and rhetorical cohesion [21], [22].

A concern is the clarity of the main idea, with 72% of students struggling to identify a central theme in their writing. According to cognitive process theory, the ability to establish and retain a coherent thesis is a critical component of the planning phase which directs all future decisions in the writing process [28]. When students do not have a clear sense of purpose or fundamental argument, their writing becomes unfocused and fragmented [29]. Research shows that improving students' metacognitive capabilities and goal-setting abilities can help students to increase their coherent writing [30], [31]. Teachers can assist students in creating a more systematic

approach for their writing assignments with acknowledgement of metacognitive awareness and the goal-setting procedure.

Students' difficulty in identifying important supporting details is also concerning. More than half (57%) of the students did not give sufficient or effective explanation of their thoughts. This shows that students may not fully comprehend the rhetorical purpose of supporting details or that they lack of the analytical skills. The absence of relevant explanations may reduce the text's clarity. According to Shoostari and Mir [32], scaffolding is useful for assisting students in mastering challenging activities. It might be possible that they have not gotten sufficient modeling or guided experience if students do not provide relevant and well-developed material on how to elaborate and put their ideas into context. Students may use generic or unrelated information which makes their arguments less successful without clear instructions and feedback. Hereby, this highlights the necessity of implementing effective scaffolding strategies in writing instruction to enhance students' ability to provide detailed and relevant supporting details in students' work.

The findings also reveal major issues with overall text organization as shown by the categories of consistency, topic unity, also transitions and coherence. The significant percentages of students assessed at the Limited level for consistency (48%), topic unity (52%), and transitions and coherence (56%). It implies that half of the students are unable to write logically and coherently. Inconsistent writing might involve sudden topic shifts, repetitious or contradicting ideas, and disjointed paragraph transitions all of which undermine text coherence and reduce conversational impact. Furthermore, inconsistencies can indicate a lack of genre awareness. While more than half of the students received a Limited rating for transitions and coherence indicating that they are unfamiliar with the accepted arrangements required to produce logical text. These components are crucial for keeping the content flows coherently and meaningfully. The lack of coherence reflects not only poor writing habits but also a limited comprehension of discourse-level principles in academic writing. According to Hyland [33], good writing is often genre-specific, requiring students to use various rhetorical structures based on the communicative objective. If students are not exposed to genre-based instruction or exemplars, they are less likely to absorb the regular writing patterns that are anticipated in academic settings. These difficulties are not merely linguistic but structural, pointing to the need for genre-based instruction that explicitly teaches how texts function in context [33]. In writing, classrooms should adopt process and strategy-based approaches to improve students' focus in writing. Additionally, writing instruction should emphasize in brainstorming, planning, drafting, and editing. It allows students to understand the cyclical nature of writing. By integrating peer feedback with the teacher's scaffolding, it can help students become more reflective and aware of their writing choices.

Finally, the results reflect on the need to reconsider writing pedagogy to extend the focus from correctness to a more holistic and systematic construction of writing proficiency. To support language learners writers, they must be assisted in expressing their thoughts articulately, ordering information coherently, and transitioning smoothly between ideas. With that meta-level integration and reflection, students can come to the kind of focus needed to learn to produce successful academic writing.

IV. Conclusion

The analysis of students' writing performance reveals issues in some areas including clarity of the main idea, development of relevant supporting details, consistency, topic unity, and coherence. The majority of students displayed Basic or Limited proficiency. It demonstrates systemic weakness in not only linguistic competence but also cognitive and rhetorical awareness which are required for academic writing. Grounded on contemporary scholarly articles and contemporary theoretical models, this study supports the integration of constructivist-oriented writing approaches, multimodal pedagogical approaches, computerized writing assessment tools, and peer review processes as active mechanisms for the development of writing instruction. Particularly, the application of constructivist framework [34], coupled with writing tasks focused on critical thinking [35] and writing assessment literacy [36]), can all work together to encourage a more directed, coherent, and self-directed writing practice among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

Briefly explain, enhancing students' focus on writing entails a comprehensive pedagogy that is underpinned to enhance not only linguistic correctness but also the cognitive and metacognitive capabilities for planning, organization, and revising written texts. Teaching practices in the future need to be centered on reflective tasks, group work, and feedback in order to enable students to internalize the general principles of effective writing. Such an approach will be pivotal in cultivating autonomous and proficient writers equipped for academic and professional communication in English. This strategy will play a critical role in developing students' writing.

However, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the study involved a comparatively small population of 25 students from only one class, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings to broader EFL settings. Second, the qualitative mode of writing tests is subject to potential subjectivity despite the use of an analytic rubric in the study, and inter-rater reliability was not given any attention. Lastly, the classroom-based setting might not best represent the depth of student writing performance in varied school environments.

Considering constraints of these studies, future research has to conduct comparison studies across institutions and larger student populations with a diverse mix to cross-validate, and generalize the findings. Further explorations of genre-based pedagogies, scaffolding instruction, and multimodal strategies in writing could teach us more about instructional models as well. Based on these analyses, instructors and researchers can frame a more effective model to improve writing in EFL contexts.

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