

# CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ESSAY WRITING: A REFLECTION ON STUDENTS' LIMITED CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Nana Suciati<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Education Study Program, Faculty of Social and Humanities  
University of PGRI Kalimantan

Email: [nanasuciati@upk.ac.id](mailto:nanasuciati@upk.ac.id)

## ABSTRAK

Penulisan esai merupakan komponen penting dalam pembelajaran menulis akademik pada konteks English as a Foreign Language (EFL) karena menuntut mahasiswa untuk mengintegrasikan kompetensi kebahasaan dengan keterampilan berpikir kritis. Namun, dalam praktik pembelajaran di kelas, banyak mahasiswa EFL masih mengalami kesulitan dalam menghasilkan esai yang fokus dan terorganisasi dengan baik. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk merefleksikan tantangan dalam pengajaran penulisan esai, khususnya yang berkaitan dengan keterbatasan keterampilan berpikir kritis mahasiswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif reflektif dengan sumber data berupa observasi kelas terhadap 12 mahasiswa yang mengikuti mata kuliah Essay Writing pada Tahun Akademik 2025/2026 dan observasi hasil draf esai mahasiswa, serta catatan/jurnal reflektif pengajar di Mata Kuliah Essay Writing Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas PGRI Kalimantan (UPK). Catatan reflektif diklasifikasikan berdasarkan tahapan penulisan esai, yang meliputi proses mempersempit topik yang diberikan, merumuskan thesis statement, mengembangkan paragraf isi, serta menyusun bagian pendahuluan dan simpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan dalam mempersempit topik esai yang bersifat luas, merumuskan thesis statement yang jelas dan spesifik, serta menjaga koherensi antara thesis statement dan pengembangan paragraf isi. Meskipun mahasiswa diperbolehkan menggunakan alat berbasis kecerdasan buatan seperti ChatGPT dalam proses penulisan, kualitas esai yang dihasilkan sering kali belum memenuhi standar akademik. Hal ini terutama disebabkan oleh kurangnya pemahaman konseptual mahasiswa terhadap thesis statement dan organisasi esai, sehingga membatasi kemampuan mereka dalam mengevaluasi dan menyempurnakan teks yang dihasilkan oleh AI secara kritis. Oleh karena itu, penelitian selanjutnya disarankan untuk mengkaji secara empiris strategi pembelajaran yang mengintegrasikan pengembangan berpikir kritis dalam penulisan esai melalui penelitian eksperimen atau penelitian tindakan kelas.

**Kata Kunci:** Penulisan Esai, Tantangan, Studi Reflektif, Berpikir Kritis, Teks Hasil AI.

## ABSTRACT

Essay writing is a crucial component of academic writing instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, as it requires students to integrate linguistic competence with critical thinking skills. However, in classroom practice, many EFL students continue to face difficulties in producing focused and well-organized essays. This paper aims to reflect on the challenges in teaching essay writing, particularly those related to students' limited critical thinking skills. The study employed a qualitative reflective research design, drawing on classroom observations of 12 students who enrolled in an Essay Writing Course during Academic Year 2025/2026 and students' essay drafts as well as reflective teaching notes collected from an essay writing course at an English Education Study Program of UPK (University of PGRI Kalimantan). The teaching notes were categorized based on the stages of writing essay, starting from narrowing given topics, formulating thesis statement, developing body, and making introduction and conclusion.

The findings indicate that students experience difficulty in narrowing broad essay topics, formulating clear and specific thesis statements, and maintaining coherence between thesis statements and body paragraph development. Although students are permitted to use artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT during the writing process, the quality of the resulting essays often fails to meet academic standards. This issue is primarily attributed to students' insufficient conceptual understanding of thesis statements and essay organization, which restricts their ability to evaluate and refine AI-generated content critically. It is suggested

that future research should empirically investigate instructional strategies that integrate critical thinking development into essay writing through experimental or classroom-based action research.

**Keywords:** Essay Writing, Challenges, Reflective Study, Critical Thinking, AI-Generated Text.

## INTRODUCTION

The writing courses at English Education Department in University of PGRI Kalimantan is started with paragraph writing, continued to essay writing, and ended with Academic Writing. The hierarchy is designed in order to give a scaffolding experience in writing target, which is Academic Writing. The design is supposed to accommodate students' to make a standard academic text.

The essay writing is an introduction step before students write academic essay. Here, students are expected to demonstrate not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to construct logical, coherent, and well-supported arguments. Essay writing refers to a structured form of academic writing in which learners are required to develop ideas systematically, present a clear thesis, and support arguments through evidence and reasoning. The main competencies targeted in essay writing instruction include idea development, organization, coherence, argumentation, and the appropriate use of academic language conventions (Hyland, 2019).

In achieving these competencies, essay writing requires the integration of several language components, such as grammatical accuracy, word choice, unity, coherence, and rhetorical organization. Mastery of these components enables students to articulate their ideas effectively and meet academic standards. However, linguistic competence alone is insufficient for producing quality essays. Students must also possess adequate critical thinking skills, which allow them to analyze issues, evaluate information, synthesize ideas, and formulate reasoned arguments.

Previous studies in EFL writing have emphasized that weaknesses in critical thinking often result in essays that are descriptive, repetitive, and lacking analytical depth, even when language errors are minimal (Facione, 2015; Hyland, 2019). A reflective studies in Indonesian higher education contexts have reported that EFL students struggle to move beyond surface-level description toward analytical and evaluative writing (Rahmawati and Fitriani, 2021). Both studies indicate a persistent gap between instructional expectations and students' actual performance.

In fact, this condition is also mentioned in the author's prior study conducted in the Academic Writing class at the English Study Program, UPK

Banjarmasin. The study, entitled *The Analysis of Students' Strengths and Weaknesses in Academic Writing Class, English Study Program, UPK Banjarmasin* (Suciati, N, et.al, 2024), revealed that while students demonstrated relative strengths in basic essay structure, formatting, and language mechanics, they showed significant weaknesses in developing arguments, critically engaging with ideas, and elaborating supporting evidence. These findings suggest that students' limited critical thinking skills remain a central challenge in teaching essay writing.

Although previous research has extensively discussed the relationship between critical thinking and writing performance, they lacked studies of addressing the issue from a teacher's reflective perspective, particularly in terms of how students' limited critical thinking skills shape classroom challenges in essay writing instruction. This reflective dimension is important because teachers' pedagogical awareness plays a significant role in bridging the gap between theoretical expectations and actual classroom practices.

Therefore, this paper aims to reflect on the challenges of teaching essay writing in EFL contexts, with particular emphasis on students' limited critical thinking skills. By drawing on relevant literature and classroom-based reflections, this study seeks to contribute pedagogical insights into how critical thinking limitations influence essay writing instruction and to suggest more students' guidance on the use of AI tools such ChatGPT for making academic writing in EFL higher education

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative reflective research design. The research is a pedagogical reflection supported by document analysis and classroom-based observation (Farrel, 2018). The observation was done 6 times during regular meeting. One meeting was about 100 minutes. Most of meeting, students presented their work based on task given by lecturer. From the presentation, their performance was reviewed. This design is considered appropriate as the study

focused on understanding instructional challenges from the teacher's perspective and situating them within relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

The subject of the study are 12 students who enrolled in Essay Writing Course during Academic Year 2025/2026. The students' written works and classroom learning processes are used as the primary sources of reflection to identify recurring issues related to critical thinking in essay writing. Students' essays are examined using commonly accepted criteria in academic writing, such as idea development, argumentation, coherence, use of evidence, and critical engagement with topics. These aspects are used as indicators of students' critical thinking performance in essay writing.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively by identifying recurring patterns and challenges related to critical thinking in essay writing. Every student was given a chance to present their work based on the guided task. Their works were reviewed and identified based on writing themes from the stages of essay, starting from narrowing given topics, formulating thesis statement, developing body, and making introduction and conclusion.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### RESULTS

This reflective study revealed several challenges faced by EFL students in essay writing classes, particularly those related to limited critical thinking skills. First, students demonstrated difficulty in narrowing down essay topics provided by the instructor. When students were assigned broad topics such as the role of local culture in teaching English in Indonesian classrooms, the benefits and risks of using AI tools like ChatGPT in English learning, and the integration of climate change education into English language teaching, they tended to address the topics superficially without specifying a clear focus. As a result, their essays lacked depth and coherence, indicating an inability to delimit critically the scope of discussion in a short academic essay.

Second, students showed limited understanding of the formal requirements of a thesis statement. Many students failed to distinguish between a sentence and a phrase, producing thesis statements that did not meet the minimum syntactic requirement of a complete sentence. In other cases, thesis statements contained multiple ideas due to the use of compound or complex sentence structures, which later complicate paragraph development and weaken the overall essay organization.

Third, even when students attempted to formulate thesis statements, these statements were often vague and unfocused. The thesis statements did not clearly indicate the main arguments to be discussed in the body paragraphs, resulting in body paragraphs that were loosely connected or inconsistent and irrelevant with the thesis statement.

Finally, although students were permitted to use AI tools such as ChatGPT during the writing process, the generated thesis statements and essays frequently failed to meet academic standards. Classroom observation indicated that students lacked conceptual understanding of thesis statement construction and essay rhetorical structure, which limited their ability to formulate effective prompts and to evaluate the outputs critically. This is one example of students' lack conceptual understanding of thesis statement: "The rhythm of the traditional song Ampar-Ampar Pisang used to create English songs that help elementary school students improve their pronunciation". This is not a sentence, which is a vital requirement of thesis statement. Since it has no predicate, the idea became not clear. So the essay will have unfocused topic to be developed.

### DISCUSSIONS

This reflective study revealed several challenges faced by EFL students in essay writing classes, particularly those related to limited critical thinking skills. First, students demonstrated difficulty in narrowing down essay topics provided by the instructor. When students were assigned broad topics such as the role of local culture in teaching English in Indonesian classrooms, the benefits and risks of using AI tools like ChatGPT in English learning, and the integration of climate change education into English language teaching, they tended to address the topics superficially without specifying a clear focus. As a result, their essays lacked depth and coherence, indicating an inability to delimit critically the scope of discussion in a short academic essay.

These findings suggest that students' challenges in essay writing are not solely linguistic in nature but are strongly associated with limited critical thinking skills. The inability to narrow essay topics reflects students' difficulty in analyzing broad issues, identifying relevant dimensions, and making reasoned decisions about focus, skills that are central to critical thinking. Without these abilities, students tend to reproduce general ideas rather than construct focused and analytical arguments.

Similarly, students' difficulty in producing appropriate thesis statements indicates a lack of understanding of the rhetorical and cognitive functions of a thesis statement in academic writing. A thesis statement is not merely a grammatical requirement but a cognitive tool that guides argument development. When students fail to construct clear and specific thesis statements, it reflects limited ability to synthesize ideas and anticipate logical progression in an essay.

The misuse of compound and complex sentences in thesis statements further suggests that students may prioritize linguistic complexity over rhetorical clarity. This aligns with the observation that EFL learners often correspond advanced writing with complex sentence structures, without considering the communicative function of clarity and focus in academic argumentation.

The findings related to AI use highlight an emerging pedagogical challenge. While AI tools can support language production, students' limited understanding of essay structure and critical thinking prevents them from using such tools effectively. Without conceptual knowledge of thesis statements and rhetorical organization, students are unable to evaluate or refine texts from AI critically, leading to outputs that are structurally and academically weak.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research on EFL academic writing, which reports that students often struggle with idea development, argumentation, and critical engagement rather than basic language accuracy (Hyland, 2019). Similar findings have been reported in Indonesian EFL contexts, where students' writing tends to remain descriptive due to limited analytical and evaluative skills (Rahmawati & Fitriani, 2021).

The findings also support the results of the author's previous study (Suciati, N., et al, 2024), which identified students' strengths in basic essay structure and mechanics but highlighted weaknesses in argument development and critical thinking. The present study extends these findings by providing classroom-based reflections that illustrate how these weaknesses manifest during the essay writing process, particularly in topic selection and thesis statement formulation.

Moreover, the challenges associated with AI-assisted writing align with recent studies indicating that technology alone does not improve academic writing quality without adequate critical literacy and rhetorical awareness (Kasneci et al., 2023). While AI tools offer potential benefits, their effectiveness depends largely on students' cognitive and

metacognitive abilities, especially in evaluating and refining AI-generated content.

Overall, this study reinforces existing research emphasizing the central role of critical thinking in EFL essay writing and highlights the need for explicit instruction in thesis statement construction, topic narrowing, and rhetorical organization, particularly in the context of increasing AI use in language learning.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that students' difficulties are students inability to analyze topics, formulate clear and specific thesis statements, and organize arguments coherently. These challenges were evident in students' difficulty in narrowing broad topics, distinguishing between sentences and phrases when constructing thesis statements, and aligning thesis statements with body paragraph development. The study also highlights that the integration of AI tools such as ChatGPT does not automatically improve writing quality when students are lack of critical thinking skills and rhetorical awareness; instead, ineffective use of AI reflects students' limited ability to critically evaluate and refine generated content. By situating classroom challenges within existing literature, this study offers pedagogical insights for EFL instructors in higher education and suggests that future research should empirically investigate instructional strategies that integrate critical thinking development into essay writing through experimental or classroom-based action research. Teacher's guidance for making useful prompts for students toward using AI is probably a clever instruction students need in present days rather than let them work with AI tools without teacher's guidance.

## REFERENCES

- Borg, S. (2013). *Teacher research in language teaching: A critical analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Facione, P. A. (2015). *Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts*. Insight Assessment.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2015). *Reflective practice in ESL teacher development groups*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Farrell, T. S. C. (2018). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kasneci, E., et al. (2023). ChatGPT for good? On opportunities and challenges of large language models for education. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 103, 102274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2023.102274>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Rahmawati, Y., & Fitriani, S. S. (2021). Students' difficulties in developing critical thinking in academic writing. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 10(2), 150–160.
- Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Suciati, N., Palupi, T. W., & Rusdiana, I. (2024). Analysis of Students' Strengths and Weaknesses in Academic Writing at Universitas PGRI Kalimantan. *Tefla Journal (Teaching English As Foreign Language and Applied Linguistics Journal)*, 6(1), 17–22. <https://doi.org/10.35747/tefla.v6i1.1024>.