

# The Needs Analysis of ESL Learners' Expository Writing Challenges: Perspectives of ESL Teachers

Noorfatin Zakaria, Nur Ainil Sulaiman

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM, Bangi Selangor, Malaysia

Email: nrfatinzakaria@gmail.com, nurainil@ukm.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i5/21387>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i5/21387

**Published Date:** 09 May 2024

## Abstract

Effective communication in English, especially in writing, holds increasing global significance. Despite exposure to all four language skills, ESL learners often find writing most challenging. This sentiment is echoed within English education system and ESL learners in Malaysia, which highlight the importance of writing while acknowledging its difficulty to master. This research addresses the relatively unexplored area of expository writing challenges among ESL learners, which aims to enhance their proficiency in this writing genre by exploring into ESL teachers' perspectives on the challenges ESL learners encounter in writing expository essays. Utilising Sidek's Module Development Framework, 8 English teachers, each with over 5 years of teaching experience across secondary levels, participated in this needs analysis interview. The findings revealed several key challenges, where ESL learners displayed limited knowledge and understanding of topics, struggled with maintaining flow and coherence in their expositions, exhibited limited vocabulary and grammar proficiency and the teachers encountered difficulty aligning writing topics with students' interest. To address these hurdles and enhance writing skills, integrating more interactive and student-centered learning strategies into ESL writing lessons is recommended. Ultimately, these findings serve as the groundwork for developing a tailored writing module to improve ESL teachers' and learners' expository writing proficiency.

**Keywords:** ESL Writing, Expository Essay, Needs Analysis, Writing Challenges, ESL Learners

## Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in English, particularly in writing, has become increasingly crucial in the global landscape. This emphasis on writing skills demonstrates excellent communication and is a necessary component for sharing thoughts and information (Hassan et al., 2021). Specifically in exposition, this writing genre is essential in allowing ESL learners to grasp difficult ideas and keep themselves updated with current issues, as it serves a bridge to overall learning and language success (Bahang et al., 2021). This, then, extends to better careers success, which reflects learners' effective communication and cognitive processes, that encourage critical and reflective thinking, which are crucial in their career

development and personal growth (Lee & Tan, 2020; Smith, 2018). This acknowledgement derives as employers have now recognised the importance of English language and communication skills, including both written and verbal ability, in the employment of graduates in the nation (Ting et al., 2017). Also, as writing encourages the development of critical thinking in ESL learners, this allows them to explain their thoughts systematically (Singh et al., 2020). Despite having been exposed to four language skills throughout their school years, ESL learners have consistently regarded writing as the most difficult element (Ceylan, 2019) as the process is seen to be intimidating, especially for learners who lack in confidence in their ability to use English language (Soomro, 2022).

This viewpoint is shared by both the English education system and ESL learners in Malaysia, emphasising the significance of writing as an important language skill, yet difficult to master, especially in writing expository essays (Hassan et al., 2021; Utama, 2020). Among the factors that resulted to this issue are the conventional approaches employed in teaching writing Cheng (2016) and the unnecessary focus on a product-based approach (Palpanadan et al., 2019). As a result, ESL learners were being too dependent on teachers' input. This resulted to uninspiring English learning experiences, which hindered the development of writing techniques Cheng (2016) and ability to communicate effectively and develop higher-order thinking skills (Palpanadan et al., 2019). Importantly, these have not only demotivated learners but also prevented them from using English consistently in their daily lives (Naeem et al., 2023). Additionally, Mustafa et al (2022) found that challenging course material, writing anxiety and difficulties with producing grammatically accurate writing have resulted to disorganised writing among ESL learners. Altogether, these challenges have deterred learners from improving their writing abilities and have emphasised the need for better expository writing instruction. As it is a type of writing that aims to clarify, inform and describe about an issue in an orderly and understandable way, its importance is not only in mastering language proficiency but also critical thinking and effective communication (Lee & Tan, 2020; Smith, 2018).

### **Literature Review**

This literature review examines the diverse environment of ESL learners' expository writing issues, as seen by ESL teachers. Through an examination of extant literature, the subtle interplay between various aspects of writing proficiency, spanning from foundational skills to more advanced competencies, is shown. By deconstructing the specific challenges that ESL learners face when mastering expository writing, insights are sought that might guide targeted interventions and curricular changes to better help these learners on their language development path.

### ***Components of Writing Skills***

In education, language skills encompass of two categories - receptive skills, which include listening and reading and productive skills, which involved writing and speaking (Akhtar et al., 2019). Labelling as one of the productive skills, writing instruction is crucial in second language learning for effective communication (Jo, 2021). To master writing skills, ESL learners need to acquire the ability to incorporate basic and advanced writing skills. The former encompasses the proper use of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, punctuation and writing genre (Fitria (2020); Moses & Mohamad (2019)), while the latter involves advanced skills include the integration of ideas, proper language structure and effective information presentation (Maru

et al., 2020; Murtiningsih et al., 2022; Zaki, 2022). This dual proficiency is essential for ESL learners to be excellent in their written communication.

In the context of writing an exposition, ESL learners are required to compose well-structured essays. This would focus on their ability to develop their understanding of cause-effect, problem-solution and comparison-contrast, enhancing their reading comprehension in facilitating the composition of expository text. Challenges in writing exposition become evident when attempting to excel their writing in the National Certificate of Education or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), where strong expository writing skills are tested, carrying the most weight in the paper (Safar, 2020). As the goal of writing an exposition is to provide readers with information and additional knowledge, ESL learners must express their ideas systematically, coherently and comprehensively. However, the challenges in writing the genre persist, where ESL learners often face difficulties in obtaining sufficient information due to a lack of knowledge and resources and struggling with a poor mastery of language rules as well as writing development and organisation (Rizaldi et. al., 2022). Overcoming these challenges is essential for ESL learners to excel in producing expository essays that fulfill overall informative purpose (MOE, 2013).

### ***Challenges in Basic Writing Skills in Expository Writing***

Due to limited language proficiency, ESL learners experience substantial obstacles in their English writing skills (Apolonio, 2023). This can be portrayed through their lack of understanding in grammar. In study conducted by Ghulamuddin et al (2021), employing verbs in writing causes issues for ESL learners since grammar can take on numerous forms depending on the tense and subject matter. Rizaldi, et al.'s study (2022) also echoed the same findings, as they identified that ESL learners struggled with choosing the correct tenses in writing their expository essay. This is parallel with studies conducted in the same area that found the lack of grammar knowledge, which is essential for expressing ideas and creating good sentences, could cause anxiety, especially when ESL learners attempted to construct sentences with proper grammar (Chigbu et al., 2023).

Lack of proper and wider range of vocabulary is another linguistic barrier that ESL learners encounter in expository writing. ESL learners were found frequently struggle to choose appropriate words to express their thoughts, which stems from the overuse complicated or inappropriate vocabulary, typically in an attempt to make an impression on their readers or direct translation from the mother tongue Derakhshan & Karimian (2020) and a lack of topic-specific vocabulary (Chigbu et al., 2023). As a result, they failed to explain and arrange their ideas in writing and had limited their creativity due to the repetitive use of the same words and phrases. Hence, it complicated the readers' comprehension of the intended meaning of the sentences due to poor word choices (Dhuli et al., 2023). To cope, the use of peer and self-assessment that provides constructive feedback as well as collaborative activities, in the whole process-based strategy has proved to assist in minimising linguistic errors, which led to improved writing development and organisation (Azman & Ayub, 2021; Nasri et al., 2022).

### ***Challenges in Advanced Writing Skills in Expository Writing***

Other than grammar and vocabulary, improper use of transition signals is also another element where ESL learners struggle (Segaran & Hashim, 2022). Although it is important to construct well-formed sentences with a variety of syntactic structures, incompetent ESL learners frequently employed inaccurate and fragmented phrases due to the inability to use

proper cohesive devices (Arifin et al., 2021, Wijayanti et al., 2023). Consequently, this resulted to the challenges in understanding the flow and coherence of the written piece, which limiting learner's capability to produce high-quality expository writing. In line with Nindya and Widyati's (2020) observation that ESL learners tended to produce fewer complex phrases and had difficulty using cohesive devices, which are necessary for generating high-quality writing, Hashim et al (2019); Rizaldi et al (2022) revealed that these learners struggled to construct coherent sentence structures. Their incapability to employ appropriate cohesive devices in writing have made it challenging to use more compound and complex sentences in expository writing. This challenge arises from the demand of greater cognitive ability, hence, resulted to incoherency in expository writing.

Expository writing presents another cognitive obstacle in development the writing content. According to Saravanan et al (2021), ESL learners frequently encounter difficulty exploring and expressing ideas because they placed more emphasis on grammar, spelling and vocabulary than the writing contents. This emphasis hindered the overall content development, which resulted the written text to lack depth and coherence (Ismail & Sabil, 2029; Rizaldi et al., 2020). Moreover, the importance of integrating reading and writing skills to improve writing proficiency among ESL learners is emphasised in several studies (Piamsai, 2020; Emak & Ismail, 2021; Anaktototy, 2023). To elaborate, poor reading habits (Andersen et al., 2018) has caused ESL learners to have limited knowledge on the topics discussed and further impede their ability to elaborate their points in writing, which later contribute to difficulties in developing well-elaborated paragraphs (Jagajah, et al., 2019; Fernando, 2020). This is subsequently highlighted by Chigbu et al (2023), who pointed out that ESL learners who are occasional or infrequent readers may find expository topics unfamiliar because they are unaware of current affairs. This study also demonstrated learners' difficulties in organising their writing at both content and structural levels. At the content level, challenges emerged as they struggled in exploring ideas, explaining reasons and delving into the implications of specific issues. This resulted poor introductions, underdeveloped explanations and arguments and less appealing conclusions, which, in turn, impacted the structural level of the essay (Sulaiman et al., 2020; Chigbu et al., 2023).

Aligning writing topics with students' interest poses a significant challenge for teachers and can impede student engagement in writing activities. Saravanan et al (2021) reveals that the formal emphasis on structural features in writing activities rather than considering learners' interests complicates the connection between topics and students' involvement in the writing activities. Adding to this, the imposition of topics by teachers can impact learners' interest and success in writing tasks (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2018) as it can adversely affect their interest and success in writing tasks, thus, creates a disconnection from the writing process. This situation diminishes motivation and hampers writing performance when topics fail to resonate with learners. Acknowledging this, Alkhalaf (2022) highlights the importance of learners' interest in writing topics as it leads to more effective writing. This is proved by Bentahar and Cranker (2021) as they point out that when learners are passionate about their writing topics, they demonstrate greater fluency, understanding and ability to synthesise information. Nida's (2021) study further supports this notion as it is proven in her study that aligning writing topics with learners' interests leads to enhanced comprehension and classroom participation. Thus, by acknowledging the significance of aligning topics with learners' interests enables to provide meaningful writing activities and foster a supportive environment, teachers can effectively improve learners' engagement and writing performance.

Having been exposed to abundant of research on the challenges faced among ESL learners in mastering English writing using several composition genres, the direct use of exposition, specifically, was still scarce (Kitjaroonchai & Suppasetseree, 2021). Thus, this paper intends to fill the gap by looking at the problems faced by ESL learners in writing expository essays, which give a comprehensive understanding of the challenges so that it would help in tailoring writing interventions to meet the needs of ESL learners in enhancing their expository writing abilities. Hence, this study tries to answer the following research question:

1. In the perspectives of ESL teachers, what challenges do Form Four ESL learners encounter when writing expository essays?

### Methodology

The research utilised a qualitative research design, which employed interviews as the primary tool for data collection and analysis to explore challenges in ESL learners' expository writing by delving deeply into the experiences and perspective of participants (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Eight ESL teachers with over five years of teaching experience across secondary levels participated in the needs analysis interview (see Table 1), which a combination of bachelor's and master degree in Teaching English as Second Language (TESL). Therefore, the participants were considered to have the credibility, knowledge and skills required for teaching English and allow their experience to contribute in answering the research question. The selection of this number of participants aligned with recommendations proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Careful consideration was given to field-related and ethical aspects to ensure participants' confidentiality throughout the research process and diversity. A structured component explored on teachers' experience in teaching expository essay resulted in 6 interview items that uncovered the challenges faced by ESL learners in writing exposition. These items were validated thoroughly by field and language experts in this language field. The collected data consisted of eight recorder interviews underwent transcription, coding and thematic analysis aimed at revealing responses to the research questions.

Table 1

*Educational Background and teaching experience of the research participants in Stage 1*

	Anita	Ainaa	Natra	Lisa	Tan	Susan	Rose	Atiqah
Age	35	33	35	35	35	35	37	38
English teaching experience	11	9	11	11	11	11	13	14
Academic Achievement	Bachelor's / Master Degree in Teaching English as Second Language (TESL)							

### Findings

To safeguard the participants' confidentiality, the researcher gave them pseudonyms. The results were presented alongside excerpts from teacher interviews, with each transcript designated "IV" to aid identification. For example, the label (Anita, IV1/3745-3947) designates

"Anita" as the participant's pseudonym, "IV1" as the first audio interview with Teacher Anita, and "3745-3947" as the sentence position in the transcript. Furthermore, the study found several challenges faced by ESL teachers while teaching expository essay writing. These obstacles include ESL students' limited understanding of topics, difficulties maintaining coherence in their writing, insufficient vocabulary and grammatical abilities, and teachers' challenges in selecting writing topics that align with students' interests.

### **Students' Limited Knowledge and Understanding of The Topics**

One significant challenge highlighted was the learners' inadequate knowledge and understanding of the topics, which made it impossible to deliver thorough and well-informed explanations owing to a lack of previous information on the chosen topic. Teacher Anita stated that her learners have lack of awareness of current events, as in the following passage:

*"Firstly, my students they don't read so they are not aware of what happening around them.." (Anita/ IV1/2031-2136)*

Consequently, they were seen to be disconnected from what is happening in both their surroundings and global context. This indicated a limited exposure to information and news which often sources of world knowledge.

This has also been a problem by Teacher Lisa as she claimed that one of the significant challenges for her learners is a lack of background knowledge, as stated in this quotation:

*"...the second one would be lack of background knowledge. Students need to have adequate background knowledge to talk about the topic. They would be making a lot of mistakes if they dont know what they are writing about." (Lisa/IV4/3512-3756)*

From the above, it can be said that without sufficient understanding of the topic, learners may struggle to articulate their thoughts effectively and may make numerous errors in their writing, which emphasises the importance of having a solid foundation of knowledge about the subject matter before attempting to discuss or write about it.

Teacher Rose also shared the same view as she stated that while learners may understand the question, they may lack the necessary depth of knowledge about the topic when it comes to writing about it. This is showed in the following excerpt:

*"Another related challenging aspect is the fact that they might know the question, understand it but they dont have the extensive or the extra knowledge about the topic itself when it comes to writing it. the topic can be related to them as school or family related but sometimes the question can also ask them to think bigger or wider perspective and that can be a challenge for students." (Rose/ IV8/2513-2838)*

She highlighted that learners may be familiar with the topic on a personal level such as school or family-related matter but broader questions that require a wider perspective may pose difficulties for the learners as they have limited exposure to the context. Hence, they could struggle to expand their understanding beyond their immediate experiences and hinder their ability to address broader concepts effectively.

***Lack of Skills in Mastering the Flow and Coherence of the Writing***

The analysis also found that another significant difficulty identified by the teachers is a lack of proficiency in grasping the flow and coherence of the writing. Based on their teaching experience, learners frequently struggle with organising ideas logically, generating smooth transitions between paragraphs and maintaining a cohesive structure. This was one of the main concerns mentioned by Teacher Anita in her interview.

*“Planning is the most difficult part because they don't know on how to create flow and this will affect their writing in term of coherent and how things are being put together.” (Anita/ IV1/2647-2720)*

From the above excerpt, she highlighted that learners struggle with planning their writing, particularly in creating a coherent flow and structuring their ideas effectively. This difficulty can significantly impact the overall quality of their writing as it affects how well their ideas are organised and presented.

Similarly, Teacher Ainaa, Teacher Lisa and Teacher Susan emphasised on the similar matter that learners struggle with organising their writing effectively. This can be showed from the following passages:

*“It is the organisation. Sometime I noticed my students might combine 2 points in 1 paragraph. They don't know how to split it into different paragraph.” (Ainaa/IV2/2047-2134)*

*“I would say connecting their ideas or developing and organising their thoughts in the essay. Because they have some difficulties in making sure that the ideas are coherent.” (Lisa/IV4/2912-3045).*

*“The most challenging aspect in writing the essay is to organise their ideas and thoughts. Most of students they have problem to organise their ideas in the essay. Even the good students still have problems.” (Susan/IV7/3128-3309)*

Both excerpts highlight on the challenges related to organising ideas and ensuring coherence in writing. While Teacher Ainaa specifically mentioned difficulties in organising paragraphs and separating points into different paragraphs, Teacher Lisa addressed broader issue related to connecting ideas and organising thoughts throughout the essay. On a different coin, Teacher Susan provided additional insight by suggesting that this difficulty persists even among proficient students. This finding has broadened the perspective that proved the difficulty in organising ideas is not limited to specific skill levels but is a common issue encountered by learners of all levels. Ultimately, these lack of organisation can impede clarity and coherence in their writing as readers may find it challenging to follow the flow of their ideas.

In relation to this theme, Teacher Natra and Teacher Atiqah pointed out a notable obstacle faced by learners struggled with providing relevant and valid elaborations in their writing. This is showed in the following excerpts:

*“Elaborations that are relevant and valid points. they can pretty much start the intro, have the body paragraph, write the conclusion, but in term of elaboration, that is they most challenging.” (Natra/IV3/3441-3602).*

*“They are unable to elaborate their ideas. That is the most challenging aspect.” (Atiqah/IV8/2343-2427).*

The first excerpt from Teacher Natra suggested that learners were able to structure their essays with an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion but struggled with providing thorough and meaningful elaboration. Similarly, Teacher Atiqah reinforced this point by stating that elaborating the ideas is the most difficult part in writing expository essays. These findings indicate that even though learners may have a basic grasp of essay structure, they face a great challenge in developing and expanding upon their thoughts in a way that adds depth and complexity to their writing.

### ***Limited Vocabulary and Grammar Proficiency***

The study further identified inadequate vocabulary and grammar as prevalent challenges in writing expository essays. Teachers emphasized that many learners have failed to articulate their ideas clearly and accurate due to limited vocabulary and grammatical issues. This can be seen clearly from these three excerpts from the interviews:

*“The second challenge is their vocabulary. When they don’t have enough vocabulary, they find it very difficult to write or difficult to express what they want to say. and thirdly of course it is the grammar because they dont have strong basic in the grammar knowledge so have problems with the grammar.” (Ainaa/IV2/3938-4157)*

*“It is not just ideas, they lack of vocabulary and they made a lot of grammar errors.” (Natra/IV3/3512-3537)*

*“The use of suitable and appropriate vocabulary. Why these words cant be used in certain point, why this word can be used in another. Well, for the high intermediate students, the vocab, the basic vocab is not limited, but their vocab might be limited to that topic, is one thing. because being an ESL learner, there are words that they have to continuously learn along the journey. So they might know that topic but in their own mother tongue. So knowing and using the vocab might be the issue.” (Rose/IV8/4639-4916)*

These excerpts collectively emphasise the critical role of language proficiency, particularly vocabulary and grammar, in learners’ expository writing challenges. Teachers recognised that deficiencies in vocabulary and grammar can significantly hinder learners’ ability to express themselves effectively in writing. Each excerpt acknowledged specific struggles that learners face. For instance, Teacher Ainaa and Teacher Natra gave emphasis on the difficulty expressing ideas due to limited vocabulary and chances learners making grammar errors in their writings, whereas Teacher Rose stressed on the use of appropriate vocabulary in different contexts. They highlighted the complexity of language learning and the diverse obstacle that learners encounter in expository writing.



However, it can be seen that Teacher Rose delved deeper into the vocabulary usage, particularly in different context compared to Teacher Ainaa and Teacher Nat who highlighted on the impact of vocabulary and grammar on learners' writing proficiency. Teacher Rose focused more on the challenge of selecting appropriate words for specific situations and acknowledged the ongoing process of vocabulary acquisition for ESL learners.

Together, these excerpts pointed out the interconnectedness of vocabulary and grammar proficiency. Addressing these challenges required targeted instructions and supports to enhance learners' vocabulary proficiency, grammar skills and overall writing proficiency.

### ***Aligning Writing Topic with Learners' Interests***

The analysis also found that aligning writing topic with learners' interest emerged as another key challenge in writing expository essays. Teacher Lisa mentioned that when learners lack of engagement or interest in the chosen topic, it often resulted in uninspired and disengaged writing. This can be seen for the following excerpt:

*"One of them would be the area of interest, I think. It will be difficult for the students to write if the topic is not related to their interest. Because this kind of essay, writers have to state the facts and to maintain assertive objective tone, which is not possible if the student lacks of interest in the topic."* (Lisa/IV4/4758-4937).

This excerpt is worth noting as it highlighted the importance of learners' interest in developing their writing skills. It showed that when learners lack interest in the writing topic, they could encounter challenges in writing expository essays effectively and in maintaining an objective and factual tone required for expository essays. Therefore, to facilitate effective writing and maintain the appropriate tone for expositions, it is important for teachers to consider learners' interests when selecting writing topics. This approach aims to foster meaningful and successful writing experience for learners.

### **Discussion**

The study identified several challenges prevalent in writing expository essays within the English classroom. These include limited background knowledge and understanding of the topics, difficulties in mastering the flow and coherence of the writings, constraints in vocabulary and grammar usage and challenges in aligning writing topics with learners' interests. These challenges collectively impact the quality of overall writing. Addressing these challenges is essential to enhance expository writing skills among ESL learners in English language teaching and learning contexts.

The findings indicate that ESL learners frequently struggle with writing coherent paragraphs with elaborations and maintaining the flow of their writing. Their struggles may be attributed to poor English proficiency that make it difficult for them to recognise and correct grammatical, syntactic and vocabulary errors (Apolonio, 2023). Furthermore, a lack of considerable English writing experience and exposure of correct writing structures further contributes to the difficulties of organising and expanding their thoughts with explanations and examples (Jagaiah et al., 2019; Fernando, 2020). The absence of adequate feedback, assistance and confidence in using the language complicates the learning process, making it challenging for ESL learners to comprehend the complex nature of writing (Akhtar et al., 2019;

Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Moreover, the lack of organisation of thoughts in writing is also influenced by the ineffective use of cohesive devices (Nindya & Widyati, 2020). Emphasising the use of these transitional signals is essential as they necessitate a greater comprehension of the ideas to learn to synthesise their knowledge and articulate relationships between different ideas within the subject matter. However, this skill requires not only language proficiency but also the ability to think critically on the content being presented (Singh et al., 2020). Reaching this degree of proficiency entails more expressive and sophisticated language to be utilised in written communication (Palpanadan et al., 2019).

In relation with the constraints faced by ESL learners in vocabulary and grammar usage, these challenges stemmed from numerous reasons. Firstly, employing more sophisticated vocabulary is complicated (Arifin et al., 2021; Hashim, et al., 2019; Derakhshan and Karimian, 2020; Dhuli et al., 2023). This skill involves understanding the unique ways ideas can be inferred and choosing words that not only meet the grammatical rules but also precisely convey the intended meaning demand a higher level of language proficiency and cognitive abilities (Rizaldi et al., 2022). Apart from that, the use of a wider range of vocabulary in their writing might be hampered by inadequate exposure to these aspects in both reading and writing experiences. Integrating these two skills could enhance learners' writing by exposing them to different texts (Anaktoty, 2023; Emak & Ismail, 2021). Furthermore, providing low-proficiency learners with quality reading materials acting as sample writings could expose learners to good language, writing strategies and better essay development and organisation (Piamsai, 2020). However, this study has also produced contrasted findings with Saravanan et al.'s (2021) study. Though in their study, it was proven that the application of correct grammar seemed to be less problematic due to the emphasis on mastering basic grammar and writing skills, this study has shown otherwise. While these skills are essential, the focus on them has provided limited opportunities for learners to explore more advanced writing skills. Consequently, learners received insufficient guidance in incorporating different sentence structures, proper vocabulary and effective logical connectors (Rizaldi, et al., 2022). Hence, fostering a positive learning environment where learners are inspired to express themselves creatively and have more room to experiment with language could overcome these difficulties in expository writing.

It is clear that limited background knowledge and understanding emerges as the challenging aspect in mastering ESL expository writing skills, as emphasised by the participants. Several studies such as conducted by Emak and Ismail (2021); Anaktoty (2023) emphasise the challenges encountered by ESL learners in writing expository essays due to their poor reading habits. These habits lead to a limited understanding of the topics discussed and hinder learners' ability to elaborate on points effectively, which consequently affects paragraph development. Additionally, Chigbu et al (2023) highlight that ESL learners often lack awareness of current events as they were being infrequent readers. As a result, they encounter difficulties organising and elaborating their thoughts that leads to poor quality of writing, either in content or structural level. Moreover, aligning writing topics with learners' interest could lead to limited knowledge and understanding as the topics do not resonate with learners. This may cause them to be demotivated and invest less effort in researching and comprehending the subject matter, which caused the gaps in their understanding (Alseid & Ibrahim, 2018; Bentahar & Cranker, 2021). which indicate a broader disconnection from their surroundings and the global context. Therefore, aligning writing topics with learners' interest is crucial as this will affect learners' engagement with the topic and their reading as well as research skills. When they are interested in a topic, they are more likely to actively

participate in the skills, which allow them to identify essential information and connect it to their own thoughts. This process necessitates higher-order thinking skills such as critical analysis and requires learners to express ideas coherently and effectively in their expository writing.

In summary, the findings identified various challenges in ESL learners' expository writing, including limited background knowledge, constraint in writing flow and coherence, poor vocabulary and grammar usage and difficulty in aligning topic with learners' interest. These obstacles affect writing quality, and highlights the need for tailored language interventions. Fostering a creative learning environment is crucial for overcoming these challenges and improving expository writing skills among ESL learners.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, reveals several challenges prevalent in ESL learners' expository writing that consist of limited background knowledge, writing flow and coherence issues, vocabulary and grammar constraints and difficulty aligning topics with learners' interests. These obstacles impact learners' writing quality and requires tailored language interventions for improvement. It is also essential to foster a creative learning environment to address these challenges effectively. By aligning topics with learners' interest, engagement can be enhanced, while promoting higher-order thinking skills and facilitate coherent expression of ideas in expository writing.

In addition to expand the scope of this research settings, there are several recommendations that could enhance the study's impact. Firstly, longitudinal studies in tracking ESL learners' writing process over time would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of interventions and the development of writing skills. Secondly, interventions studies targeting specific writing challenges identified in the study could be implemented to evaluate their effectiveness in improving ESL learners' writing skills. By implementing these recommendations, researchers and ESL teachers can contribute to the ongoing improvement of ESL writing instruction and support the development of writing skills among ESL learners.

### **Acknowledgement**

This research was supported by University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), under the GGPM-2022-018 research grant. The authors express gratitude to all contributors, with special acknowledgement to the Malaysian Ministry of Education, the Faculty of Education at University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the participating school, teachers and others involved.

### **References**

- Akhtar, R. N., Hassan, H., Saidalvi, A., & Hussain, S. (2019). A systematic review of the challenges and solutions of ESL students' academic writing. *International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology*, 8(5c), 1169-1171.
- Alkhalaf, S. (2022). Expressive writing in a Saudi university English foreign language (EFL) classroom: evaluating gains in syntactic complexity. *F1000research*, 11, 723.
- Alsied, S., and Ibrahim, N. (2018). Exploring challenges encountered by EFL Libyan learners in research teaching and writing. *Iafor Journal of Language Learning*, 3(2), 143-158.
- Anaktototy, K., Samponu, B., & Loppies, H. (2023). Portraying students' grammatical errors in essay writing: A study at English Education Study Program Pattimura University. *English Language Teaching and Linguistics Studies*, 5(1), 6-16.

- Andersen, L., Eiriksdottir, E., & Skaftun, A.H. (2018). The impact of poor reading habits on ESL learners' knowledge and writing skills. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(2), 45-62.
- Apolonio, J. N. B. (2023). Effectiveness of "how to write a sentence" as instructional material to improve the writing skills of grade 6 pupils. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 4(3), 958-963.
- Ariffin, K., Darus, N., Halim, N., & Awang, N. (2021). Analysing morphological errors in esl graduating students' writing based on surface structure taxonomy. *International Journal of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics*, 5(3), 42.
- Azman, M. N. Bin, & Ayub, M. K. Bin. (2021). Collaborative Writing Strategies: The Effects on Malaysia Secondary School Learners' Writing Fluency. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 10(2), 1051-1064
- Bahang, M., Nawun, A., Wutun, A., & Nurhusain, M. (2021). The use of thematic progression in writing: hortatory exposition text at second grade students of sma negeri 1 elar. *The Educational Review Usa*, 5(10), 385-390.
- Bentahar, A., and Cranker, K. (2021). Enhancing intensive english program reading and writing courses through integrated-skill activities. *Gatesol Journal*, 31(1), 54-60.
- Ceylan, N. (2019). Student perceptions of difficulties in second language writing. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 15(1), 151-157.
- Cheng, Y. (2016). *Research on cooperative interactive teaching model in college english based on multimedia network*. In International conference on education, sports, arts and management engineering, Xian, Shaanxi, China, March 2016. Paris: Atlantis Press.
- Chigbu, G. U., Emelogu, N. U., Egbe, C. I., Okoyeukwu, N. G., Eze, K. O., Nwafor, C. K., Patrick, C. P., Okon, O. E., Agbo, P. A., & Okwo, F. A. (2023). Enhancing ESL students' academic achievement in expository essay writing using digital graphic organisers: A mixed-methods research. *Heliyon*, 9(5), e15589.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Derakhshan, A., & Karimian Shirejini, R. (2020). An investigation of the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions towards the most common writing problems. *Sage Open*, 10(2), 1-10.
- Dhuli, R., Lamo, P., & Larsari, V. (2023). An analysis of the significance of vocabulary in fostering esl/efl students' writing skills: an empirical study. *International Journal of Contemporary Studies in Education (Ij-Cse)*, 2(1), 26-33.
- Emak, L., & Ismail, H. H. (2021). Incorporating reading in writing classes and its effects on ESL learners' writing. *Creative Education*, 12(08), 1949-1962.
- Fernando, I. H. S. (2020). Improving writing skills in english as a second language (ESL) through feedback, revising and multiple draft writing: an action research. *CINEC Academic Journal*, 4, 39-43.
- Fitria, T. (2020). Error analysis found in students' writing composition in simple past tense of recount text. *English Franca Academic Journal of English Language and Education*, 4(2), 141.
- Ghulamuddin, N. J. A., Mohari, S. K. M., & Ariffin, K. (2021). Discovering writing difficulties of Malay ESL primary school level students. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies*, 2(1), 27-39.
- Hashim, H., Rafiq, K. R. M., & Yunus, M. M. (2019). Improving ESL learners' grammar with gamified-learning. *Arab World English Journal*, 5, 41-50.

- Hassan, I., Rahman, A., & Azmi, M. (2021). Development of english writing skills through blended learning among esl learners in malaysia. *Arab World English Journal*, 7(1), 377-389.
- Ismail, N. H. B., & Sabil, A. B. M. (2019). An Analysis of Writing Competency Principle and Its Problem in Essay Writing. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 8(4), 1103–1109.
- Jagaiah, T., Howard, D., & Olinghouse, N. G. (2019). Writer's checklist: a procedural support for struggling writers. *The Reading Teacher*, 73(1), 103-110.
- Jo, C. (2021). Exploring general versus academic english proficiency as predictors of adolescent EFL essay writing. *Written Communication*, 38(2), 208-246.
- Kitjaroonchai, N., & Suppasetsee, S. (2021). Online collaborative writing via Google Docs: Case studies in the EFL classroom. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 12(6), 922–934.
- Lee, C., & Tan, M. (2020). Effective Communication through Expository Writing. *Journal of Language and Communication*, 15(1), 78–92.
- Maru, M. G., Pikirang, C. C., & Liando, N. (2020). *Integrating writing with listening in EFL class: A systematic review*. Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Social Sciences (ICSS 2020). *Advanced in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. (43).
- Ministry of Education. (2013). *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (preschool to post-secondary education)*. Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.my/en/dasarmenu/pelan-pembangunan-pendidikan-2013-2025>
- Moses, R. N., & Mohamad, M. (2019). Challenges faced by students and teachers on writing skills in ESL Contexts: A literature review. *Creative Education*, 10(13), 3385-3391.
- Murtiningsih, S., Kurniawati, S., & Putri, A. (2022). *University efl students' grammar mastery and their writing ability: a quantitative study*. Proceedings of the International Conference on Sustainable Innovation on Humanities, Education and Social Sciences (ICOSI-HESS 2022). *Advanced in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. (710) 226-236.
- Mustafa, A., Arbab, A., & Sayed, A. (2022). Difficulties in academic writing in english as a second/foreign language from the perspective of undergraduate students in higher education institutions in oman. *Arab World English Journal*, 13(3), 41-53.
- Naeem, W., Zahra, A., & Afsar, Z. (2023). Factors causing esl students' demotivation to learn English. *Global Language Review*, VIII(1), 114-122.
- Nasri, N. F., Habali, A. H. M., & Adam, M. H. M. (2022). Google Docs: Students' Perceptions as Online Collaborative Tool in Learning Writing Skills. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(3), 690–705.
- Nida, F. (2021). A Psycholinguistics Analysis: How Do ESL Learners in Higher Education Write Paragraphs?. *Lensa Kajian Kebahasaan Kesusastraan Dan Budaya*, 11(2), 217-236.
- Nindya, M. A. & Widiati, U. (2020). Cohesive devices in argumentative essays by Indonesian EFL learners. *Journal on English as a Foreign Language*, 10(2), 337-358.
- Palpanadan, S. T., M. Anthony, E., Ngadiran, N. M., Kadir, H., & Zainal, A. (2019). Comparative analysis of writing approaches practised in Malaysian ESL classrooms. *Journal of Education & Social Policy*, 6(3).
- Piamsai, C. (2020). The effect of scaffolding on non-proficient EFL learners' performance in an academic writing class. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 13(2), 288-305.

- Rizaldi, F., Mukrim, M., & Hastini, H. (2022). Identification of students' difficulty in writing expository essay. *e-Journal of ELTS (English Language Teaching Society)*, 10(3), 217-226.
- Safar, Z. B. M. (2020). *The science and art of teaching writing among potential ESL learners*. Darul Aman English Language Learning and Teaching Association (DELTA). Retrieved from ebook\_2\_potential\_19.12.2020.pdf (deltakedah.com)
- Saravanan, A., Palanisamy, L., & Aziz, A. (2021). Systematic review: challenges in teaching writing skills for upper secondary in esl classrooms and suggestions to overcome them. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (Mjssh)*, 6(4), 262-275.
- Segaran, V. C. & Hashim, H. (2022). 'More online quizzes, please!' the effectiveness of online quiz tools in enhancing the learning of grammar among ESL learners. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 1756-1770.
- Singh, C., Gopal, R., Ong, E., Singh, T., Mostafa, N., & Singh, R. (2020). Esl teachers' strategies to foster higher-order thinking skills to teach writing. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 17(2), 195-226.
- Soomro, A. (2022). Challenges faced by the second language learners: a review. *Sindh Journal of Linguistics*, 1(1), 51-57.
- Smith, J. (2018). The Role of Expository Writing in Developing Critical Thinking Skills. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 10(2), 112-125.
- Sulaiman, N., Salehuddin, K., & Khairudin, R. (2020). Reading english academic texts: evidence from esl undergraduates' eye movement data. *31 the Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 26(1), 60-78.
- Ting, S., Marzuki, E., Chuah, K., Misieng, J., & Jerome, C. (2017). Employers' views on importance of English proficiency and communication skill for employability in Malaysia. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 315-327.
- Utama, T. (2020). Portfolio system in teaching writing: EFL students' perceptions. *Pedagogy Journal of English Language Teaching*, 8(2), 159-168.
- Wijayanti, H., Suwandi, S., & Fitriati, S. W. (2023). Assessing the Students' Use of Cohesive Devices in Writing Hortatory Exposition Text. *English Education Journal*, 13(3), 363-369.
- Zaki, L. (2022). The use of dictogloss to improve students' writing in muhammadiyah plus secondary school batam. *Jurnal Joepallt (Journal of English Pedagogy Linguistics Literature and Teaching)*, 10(2), 145-156.