

Research article

Using Environmental Issues for Essay Writing Class: The Students' Views and Challenges

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Abstract.

Environmental degradation is real and presents threats to all living habitat on earth. Thus, the inclusion of environmental issues for a language class is close to a must. This paper is intended to describe 1) the students' perspective on using environmental topics for essay writing class, and 2) their problems when writing essay. The study uses a case study design. There were 17 students participated in the research. The instruments were interview and chat documentations. The data were collected in June 2021. All data are in the form of words and sentences. The result shows that 1) most of the students said that the environmental issues are informative, important, useful, needed, effective, real, and educative. The use of environmental issues helps them to enhance their environmental awareness; 2) almost all students have psychological problems when writing an essay, such as anxiety, nervousness, the feeling of pressure in timed writing, self-demand of perfect work, and low self-confidence. Yet, the psychological problems might be triggered by the demand of more readings about environmental issues to make the essay convincing. The result implies that content-based material discussing environmental topic should be incorporated into EFL writing class.

Keywords: environment, essay, issues, problems, views

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1. Introduction

Many parts of Indonesia lately have suffered terribly from natural disasters. News on floods, landslides, draughts, and crop failure are posed almost every day on TV and papers. These environmental problems caused by mainly two things, natural phenomena, and human intervention to nature. Sadly, the natural disasters are mostly caused by human unfriendly behaviour toward nature [1]. People in some parts of the neighbourhood still have bad habits of throwing waste on the river and to the sea. It is also typical to see people and kids use plastic bags for almost everything and do some littering. Because of these, there is an urgency to broaden people's environmental awareness so that they can appreciate nature better. As a result, the need to increase environmental awareness becomes necessary.

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School or any formal education institution becomes an option to grow the students' environmental awareness. According to Martínez-Borreguero et al. [2], education has an important role for environment sustainability. Thus, they believe that it is necessary to include the environmental education in the curricula. Furthermore, according to Zamora-Polo & Sánchez-Martín [3], it is important to train the students in higher education, especially those of the pre-service teachers, how to include the environmental issues in the curricula and how teach them with an objective to reach the Sustainability Development Goal (SDGs).

One way to integrate the environmental issues is by using a content-based instruction for a language class. According to Corzo & Lopera [4], content-based instruction fits well with the communicative use of language learning and the environmental education. One specific skill that requires the students to express their ideas is through writing. If writing is seen as a means of communication, the students can put their thought on the paper on how to protect the environment and what actions they can do to mitigate the disaster.

Besides, writing is a skill which is very important in this modern era. Having the ability to write will enable people to be recognized by other people regardless of whatever means of communication they use. It is only through the act of writing that makes thinking visible. However, to be able to write well requires a long journey since no one can teach and learn writing 'perfectly' only in a matter of weeks. Learners often wonder of what makes a good writing. A good writing is often characterized with the flow of ideas which are logically and communicatively written on paper for the intended audience [5]. As most writers have all experienced, the ideas do not necessarily arise in a linear pattern since mostly they are scattered in the writers' mind. Typically through the act of writing, the logical relationship that develops the idea is created into something meaningful. Thus, it is not enough for writers just to have ideas; they must translate them into written texts and to make it logical and meaningful for the readers.

Nowadays there is an increasing interest to integrate global issues into English language teaching (ELT). One of the global issues is the environmental protection. Many studies have been done to explore the use of environmental issues into teaching. Environmental topics can be incorporated into teaching approach; one of them is through a Genre-Based Approach (GBA) [6]. In terms of the instructional materials, digital story telling can serve as a way to incorporate environmental education in an ELT classroom [7]. Some researchers are also interested to see how nature is reflected in textbooks. Zahoor & Janjua [8] offers a term 'green textbook' for ELT materials. In their opinion, 'green textbook' refers to the instructional materials which present not only the knowledge and skills of the target language but also raise the awareness of the global

crisis, one of them is the environmental issues. Through their research, they found out that English textbook in primary level of Pakistani schools depict the anthropocentric perspective, lacking the mutual relationship between nature and human. Thus, they conclude that the selected textbooks under study lack of the environmental education values.

Other research also investigates the students' ability to write essays by using environmental topics. Setyowati et al. [9] explore the use of environmental topics for writing essays in STKIP PGRI Pasuruan. The result of her study shows that the students were able to write an essay in a full structure, the introductory paragraph, the body of the essay, and the conclusion. Their research reveals that the students' preferences to open the introductory paragraph is by using the funnel way (69%), followed with a thesis statement (97%). The top three paragraph developments used by the students to develop the essay are combining two paragraph development (35%), reasoning (38%), and cause-effect relationship (17%). For the closing, the students prefer to use recommendation (48%) and summary (48%). The study implies that environmental issues can be integrated in the writing classes.

Hembrough [10] introduces the 'eco-composition' term in her research. Eco-composition means learning to write by using environmental themes. In her research, the students were asked to practice writing by using environmental topics and published their composition in blogs. Through a case study design, she found out that there is an increase in the students' knowledge and interest in sustainability. She also found out that the students' ability in digital writing, collaborative work, and critical thinking skills are also improved. She suggests that eco-composition should be given a place in writing classes as it offers an integral part for sustainability development and digital writing practice. Newer research is conducted by Setyowati et al. [11] who investigate the overall students' ability to write essays on environmental issue. The result shows that the students' performance fall in the 'good' category (45%), and 'very good' (42%) category. The result also shows that the students' writing reflects their critical thinking skills as they present solutions to preserve nature.

It can be summed up that many recent researches focus on the analysis of text books [29] and exploring the instructional materials for ELT classroom [7]. Recent research also focuses on the approach on integrating environmental issues in ELT classroom [6], and content analysis on the students' ability in writing essays by using environmental issues [9, 11]. Yet, there is no sufficient information about the students' opinion on using environmental issues for their writing task. Therefore, this paper is intended to describe

1) the students' opinion on using environmental issues for writing essays and 2) the students' problems in writing essay.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Environmental education

The whole world nowadays has been so concerned with global issues in general, and environmental education and protection. As a result, in many field of studies today, there is an increasing awareness to protect the ecosystem by 'thinking green' and 'acting green'. This concept of the environmental education has a long history. The question of environmental education emerged in 1972 when the member of United Nations Conference raised questions critically about global environmental problems [12]. The conference laid lots of emphases on environmental education. Then, the key movement to the development of global issues education was provided by the United Nations in 1975 when it organized an International Environmental Education Workshop in Belgrade. This resulted in the Belgrade Charter [13] which set out six objectives for environmental education:

1. *Awareness*, acquiring an awareness of environmental problems.
2. *Knowledgeable*, acquiring knowledge of environmental problems, including their causes and possible solutions.
3. *Attitudes*, acquiring social values and feelings of concern about environmental problems and motivation to do something about them.
4. *Skills*, acquiring the skills necessary to solve environmental problems.
5. *Evaluative Ability*, acquiring the ability to assess environmental measures and educational programs from various angles including the ecological, political, economic, social, educational, and aesthetic.
6. *Participation*, development of a sense of responsibility and urgency about environmental problems leading to action to solve them.

The wide range of issues within the topic of Environmental Education, among others, are global warming, species extinction, endangered species, irresponsible use of plastics, illegal logging, oil spills pollution, illegal logging, and deforestation.

Looking at the objectives of environmental education above, it is important for teachers, to raise the students' environmental awareness so that in the end, they will

be willing to take participation to protect the earth. Since participation in protection is basically the true goal of environmental education, it is crucially important to integrate this issue into teaching.

2.2. Language learning and environmental education

Cates [14] states that there are several good reasons why we should care about world problems; one is ethical and second is personal. It is ethical because he believes that it is morally wrong to focus only on the textbooks and pretend that these problems do not exist. Another reason concerns with the “profession” of being a language teacher. The professions have a moral responsibility to do good things to society through the practice of their skills. Thus, within the scope of Socially Responsible Teaching (SRT), teachers have a moral responsibility to society in the practice of their specialized skills to solve world problems [15]. Furthermore, environmental issues fit well with Content Based Instruction (CBI) [14, 15, 16]. Content Based Instruction, thus, enables teachers to explore topics within the environmental issues and to teach language through its content. As a result, students will be able to expand their insights on environmental issues, so that they will become aware that their surrounding environment faces problems which needs immediate solution. In sum, with the number of challenges that our planet faces today, raising students’ environmental awareness and teaching them about the environmental values seemed to be very necessary to do.

As recently, the concerns for the environment have increased worldwide. This can be seen from the wide availability of instructional materials in the market for the language classroom. Many language textbooks, whether they are published for Junior or Senior High school level in Indonesia, now include a chapter/some chapters on environmental topics, such as “Natural Phenomena” from Contextual English [17]; “Global Issues” from Advance Learning English [18]; “Natural Phenomena” from English Zone [19]; The Impact of global Warming Could be Devastating” from Interlanguage [20], and many more. Also teachers nowadays can easily find abundant lists of “green” resources—including environmental curricula, lesson plans, pictures, flashcards, poems, songs, videos, graded readers, and art projects—in websites provided by environmentalists, teaching experts, teachers association, government institution, etc.

3. Method

This study uses a case study design. According to De Vries [21], case study is a method which investigates a complex phenomenon within its particular context. The use of case study design is considered appropriate because this research focus on one existing phenomenon. The uniqueness of this study lies in the instructional material used by the lecturer which is environmental topic. Unlike other parallel classes, the environmental topics are used in almost all type of essay, such as reasoning essay, cause effect essay, and process essay. The participants of the study are 17 students of English Language and Literature in F offering who joined essay writing class.

The instruments to collect the data are chats interview and documentation. The data collection was done in June 2021. The researchers interview the students by using WhatsApp. The analysis of students' problems is based on Byrne's [22] idea of writing problems. The researchers analyse the data mostly and qualitatively. In some cases, the researchers do simple quantitative analysis to find out the students' percentage on their problems. To achieve the objective, the researchers used a tally system. The qualitative analysis was used to describe the students' opinion from the result of the interview. To organize and analyse the data, the researchers used a simple codification technique. Thus, the data are mainly in the form of and sentences. As like in most of qualitative study, the data analysis does not follow a linear process.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. The students' view on the use of environmental issues

The first research question is investigating the students' opinion on the use of environmental topics for the essay writing course. The students were asked to write their opinion and describe the issue only in one word.

The result of the study shows that the students have positive views on the use of environmental topic. The top three opinions state that the use of environmental topic is 'informative' (24%), 'important' (12%), and 'useful' (12%).

I do not face any problem with environmental content, sometimes it excites me because it also gave me new information. I would think of it as "informative" because we need to do a further research before jumping into the writing part. (D1/Pin/F)

I personally do not have any problems with environmental content I love that certain topic about the environment, flora, fauna, and nature. One word to describe the environmental content would be "needed" (D1/Da/F)

The result also shows that using environmental issues for essay writing class challenge the students to think critically, make them curious about the issue, and raise their awareness of environmental problems.

Sometimes it excites me because it also gave me new information. I would think of it as informative. (D1/Pi/F)

I personally do not have any problems with environmental content because in my opinion it is very useful and can increase my knowledge (D1/Ge/F)

I have no problems in the environmental content and I would describe the content as 'informative'. Sometimes I do not know what is going on lately with the environment, but because of this content, I want to find out (more) and of course get a lot of new information. (D1/Na/F)

I think it is really a great way to raise our awareness towards the environment around us. I would describe it as educative (D1/Ro/F)

Looking at the data, all students welcome the use of environmental topics for their essay writing course. Some of them even felt that the issues have opened their eyes of what really goes in real life. The data show that the students have positive views on the use of environmental issues for their essay writing class.

Specific study which discusses the students' opinion on the use of environmental topic is scarce. Fauzan [23] found that secondary school students' attitude in Central Kalimantan toward environmental issue is insufficient. His research also shows that the students have low knowledge on the issue and have no solution to overcome the problem. This is so unfortunate. This study does not support Fauzan's [23] because the students in the present research have positive attitude toward the environmental issue.

Yet, there are close studies which discuss the pre-service teachers and college students' attitude on environmental issues for learning. One of them is a study conducted by Zachariou et al. [24]. They found that teachers have positive attitude toward environmental education. Zachariou et al. [24] believes that knowledge and awareness toward environment may affect one's attitude toward environmental education. Newer study also found that the students have positive attitude toward environmental protection [11]. Their study found that the students propose ideas how to protect the environment in their essay. Among them, the students think that human should replant trees and do some reforestations in a barren forest. The students also believe that, instead of

exploiting it, human should use energy/resources wisely and keep the environment clean.

4.2. The students' problems in writing

The second research question deals with the students' problem in writing essay. According to Bryne [22], there three common problems the students commonly faced when writing. The problems may come from psychological side, cognitive side, or linguistic side. The data shows that most students in the study experience the psychological issue.

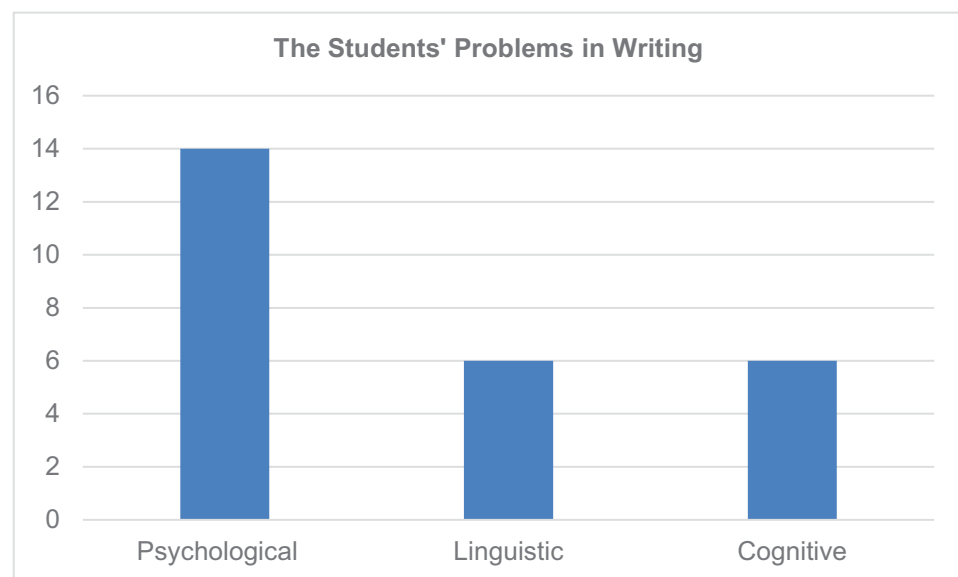


Figure 1: Writing Problems.

The data shows that more than half of the students said that they have psychological problems (60%). Interestingly, not many students have linguistic problems (20%) and cognitive problems (20%).

Writing will always cause an anxiety for me. It is like the feeling of uneasiness after submitting an essay, feeling like the essay wasn't good enough. I also had trouble with grammar and word choices. I tried to use thesaurus and Grammarly for every essay, but I always had a problem with those, and I did not know what was wrong. (D2/Pn/F)

My writing problem is mostly about time because I feel like I need forever to finish an essay or to make it perfect, but it happened because I am afraid to pour out my opinion. Also, because it is my first-time writing essays, I'm afraid that it doesn't fill the criteria for a good essay. (D2/Dr/F)

I have the feeling of pressured in timed and this makes me anxious, and I overwhelmed to calm myself first but then I remembered that there was deadline, so I needed to continue to write no matter what and then I wasn't quite sure the result is good enough. I also have problem with grammar and word choices. (D2/Dv/F)

The most difficult thing is the feeling of pressure in timed writing and perfect work. Sometimes it made me anxious and worried too much when I was progressing on my essay. (D2/Lz/F)

The above problems are the typical problems any EFL writer experience when writing in the target language. Research has shown that in Indonesian context, most of the students face similar problems as found in the present research [25, 26, 27]. They typically meet physiological anxiety and cognitive anxiety. But in relation to environmental issues for writing essay, the result yields that the students need to do more readings/research about the topic they chose in the pre- writing activity.

For me, my problem is about time. I feel it takes a long time to write a good essay, I also need time to do research to make my essay convincing. (D2/Nd/F)

We need to do a further research before jumping into the writing part. (D2/Pi/F)

In this study, the students were asked to write an essay responding to an environmental topic. Thus, the students need to do a lot of readings before they plan and start writing. Sometimes, the prewriting activities take much longer time than expected. In the pre writing activities, the students need to collect information and generate ideas [28]. As stated by Murray [29], the planning time takes most of the writing time. In a study conducted by Setyowati et al. [5], the planning activity usually takes 20 minutes before the students finally do the actual writing task. Thus, if the students focus more on the gathering information phase, they will not be able to finish the writing task on the required time. Study has shown that time management and academic achievement is closely related [30]. To solve this problem, the students need to have a better time management skill so that they can distribute time wisely in terms of sequencing each writing process.

In terms of psychological problems, many students give high demands on themselves. They want a 'perfect' writing. The high standard they set on themselves often caused writing anxiety. Rezaei & Jafari [31] state that the causes of writing anxiety, among others, are high expectations and fear of negative feedback from the teacher. They suggest that the teacher should not be too judgmental on the students' writing and give more positive atmosphere in learning. This being the case, the researchers believe that giving students more positive feedbacks and more friendly approach can lessen the students' writing anxiety.

The data also shows that the students are more anxious on the timed writing, than on the use of proper grammar and essay structure. Based on the research conducted by Syafei [32], the low achievers typically dislike timed writing, unlike the high achiever. Yet, in this study, both the low achievers and the high achievers dislike timed writing. The students felt like they need more time to write. Research conducted by Ghanbari et al. [33] shows that there is no effect of pressure writing on the students' writing performance. This implies that the writing lecturer needs to be more flexible on giving the students' time to finish writing. In other words, the writing lecturer should let the students enjoy the process of writing and be tolerable when the students submit the assignment a little bit late than the required time.

Based on the data, the researchers conclude that the students writing problems presented in the finding seem to be the typical problems faced by EFL learners. The data shows that the use of environmental problems for essay writing does not present significant problems for their performance. The researchers assume that learning to write by using any topics might pose similar problems to EFL learners.

5. Conclusions

The earth is a home for all living and non-living beings in which each has interdependence relationship, with human takes most of the dependent part. This makes human cannot live without plants and other living creatures. As human has more capabilities than other God's creation, human has more responsibilities to care for and protect the home they live in. However, with the advancement of technology and industry, without being realized, human has exploited nature. Before it is too late, it becomes crucial to integrate environmental issues into teaching. One way of doing this is by incorporating environmental issues for teaching writing. Based on the result of the study, it can be concluded that the students have positive views on the use of environmental problems for learning to write. The students believe that the issue expands their knowledge and train their critical thinking skills as they become more aware of what happens in their surroundings. The researchers also conclude that the students have minor problems in terms of the language used and writing elements. Yet, their problems mostly lay in the psychological side in which it is commonly found in any foreign language learner learning to write by using any issues. Therefore, the researchers suggest that the environmental issues must be incorporated in the language class, not most of the time, but occasionally. The environmental issue can help the students to learn meaningfully

as the issue is not trivial. The environmental problem is real and the act of mitigating the natural disaster is urgently needed.

The research, yet, has some limitations. Firstly, the result of this research cannot be used as a generalisation as it applies only to the subjects under study, or subjects with similar characteristics. To have a wider generalization, more respondents are needed by using a survey study design. Secondly, the study does not give specific information about the students' linguistic errors in writing essays by using environmental topics. Therefore, future researchers are suggested to investigate the students' grammatical errors through an error analysis study. Further research also needs to be conducted to find out whether there is a change in the students' environmental attitude before and after writing using the environmental topics. Future research can also investigate whether the students' writing ability and awareness on environmental issues differs across gender. In sum, using environmental issues for EFL writing class presents more benefits than disadvantages. With a spirit of mitigating the natural disaster and to protect the earth, using environmental issue for ELT classroom is close to a must.

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