

Obstacles in Learning Essay Writing: The Perspective of English Foreign Language Learners in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT--A crucial aspect of English proficiency that should get enormous attention to lecturers for EFL learner in higher education is essay writing skill. It seems almost of courses expect students to be able to write essays properly but it also becomes a challenge for the learners to be mastered. The purposes of this study were to determine the obstacles faced and the dominant obstacle by EFL students in writing essay. This study was qualitative research with case study design. The participants of this study were 50 university students of third semester in one of private university in Indonesia during academic year 2018-2019. The data were collected by using questionnaire and documentation. The result showed that students face few obstacles in writing essay due to grammatical, organization, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, confusion on supporting idea and word choice. Firstly, the dominant obstacle in grammatical part is the students waste a lot of time to use correct tenses in correct context with 94% of student's total number admit it. Secondly, for word choice, 86% of student's total number admit that they face obstacle in modify the word so that they prefer to use simple word rather than phrases in their writing. Thirdly, 72% of student's total number admit that they face problems in constructing the words in making supporting the ideas. Fourthly, for spelling part, 68% of student's total number admit that they reviewed their writing and checked their spelling before they submit their writing but their essay indicated few errors of spelling. Sixthly, 66% of students' total number confuse to add correct punctuation into their essay. Seventhly, for capitalization, 66% of student's total number often forget to put capitalization after full stop. Moreover, the most dominant problem that admitted by the students is grammatical problem. The findings may give valuable implication to English language lecturers as understanding students' obstacles in learning English as foreign language and providing appropriate effective teaching and media.

Keywords-- Writing Obstacles; Learners' Perspective, EFL Context

I. INTRODUCTION

Essay writing is intermediated level of English course which provided in third semester in one of private university in Indonesia. It is a challenge task for non-native English language because of complicated aspects involved such as grammar, vocabulary, organization, mechanic and content (Al Fadda, 2012). Besides, learner's critical thinking is expected to produce a good essay which cohesive and coherent consideration. Because of those complicated aspects involved, learners commonly face some obstacles to write essays (Hardiyanti, 2017; Okpe & Onjewu, 2017; Rass, 2011).

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Due to writing is one crucial skill that should be mastered by English language learners (ELL) in university level, almost all of tasks given on varying courses. Lecturers expect learners to write those tasks in English language because of their major which English Language Education. But, transfer their idea into English writing is not easy effort. They pose many obstacles for EFL learners included metacognitive weaknesses (Ramadhanti, Ghazali, Hasanah, & Harsiati, 2019). Many studies present learners produce frequently errors in writing (Ahmad, 2017; Bashir & Zamir, 2013; Chan, 2004; Demirel, 2017; Insua, Lantz, & Armstrong, 2018; Liu, 2017; Singh, Jageer Singh, Abd Razak, & Ravinthar, 2017a; Zheng, 2010). Besides errors in grammatical (Aly, 2006; Griswold, 2017; Jasim Al-Shujairi & Tan, 2017; Singh et al., 2017a; Singh, Jageer Singh, Abd Razak, & Ravinthar, 2017b), semantic and mechanic problem (Jeptarus & Ngene, 2016; Nuruzzaman, Shafiqul Islam, & Jahan Shuchi, 2018; Saud, 2018; Studies, 2014), most of that studies indicate that those errors come from two main causes such as interference language and intralingual of L2 or target language (Demirel, 2017; Jeptarus & Ngene, 2016; Long & Hatcho, 2018; Studies, 2014).

Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate the obstacles are faced by EFL learners in writing an essay. This study addresses to following research questions:

What are obstacles faced by undergraduate EFL learners in writing an essay?

What is the dominant obstacle declared by the EFL learners?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing essay is a challenging task either for lecturer and writer. It is caused by different stylistic between native language and target language. In line with writing definition, writing essay intents the writer to explore the certain concept. As deeply as writers understanding about certain subject, consequently their writing becomes more qualified. Further explanation is explained separately as following:

1. Writing Skill

This definition varies from many experts. Writing is a thinking process (Nigel, 2006). In addition, (Urquhart, Vicky and McIver, 2005) say that writing is expression of repetition which writer run repetition and revision process due to produce a writing. Furthermore, (Nigel, 2006) says that writing skill is transferring skill when it is increased, it can affect academic activities.

Writing skill is claimed as complicated skill which involves surface aspects of language to transfer and communicate idea, mind and feeling of writer to be understood easily. Those aspect are vocabulary, content, grammar, organization, and mechanic (Brown, 2001; Zemach, D & Rumisek, 2003) . Ideally, this skill needs lots of practices to sharpen writer's skill due to produce good writing.

2. Essay Writing

Essay is a piece of writing that attempts to explore deeply about particular subject (Connelly, Jacqueline; Forsyth, 2012). It can be categorized as formal writing or non-formal writing. For formal writing, it refers to research article, project report and others, but for non-format writing, it also needs to consider about magazine article, guidebook, and newspapers.

In higher education, lecturers commonly give essay task to assess and train students to develop learners' academic skill on specific subject (Connelly, Jacqueline; Forsyth, 2012). The lecturers allow learners to explore particular subject deeply, consider the academic discussion on subject, improve your writing skill and uncover a way to develop learners' critical thinking deal with argumentation in writing.

(Connelly, Jacqueline; Forsyth, 2012) explain few criteria of essay. Firstly, the words length is approximately 1.500-2.500 words. Secondly, it provides limited time to complete it. Thirdly, essay needs depth understanding of certain subject. On the other hand, essay is a piece of writing which expected writer's exploration about certain subject that can be reached by various acceptable resources.

Furthermore, to write an essay, one thing that should be considered is its structure. It refers to three components, they are introduction, body and concluding paragraph (Bailey, 2006; Zemach, D & Rumisek, 2003). In addition, (Nigel, 2006) who supported by (Connelly, Jacqueline; Forsyth, 2012) state that give additional parts of essay such as title, introduction, body paragraph of essay, conclusion, references, and bibliography. So, it can be concluded that the components of paragraph are differ from the person who give the instruction about what kind of essay that should be made and what elements should be completed. For this case, students are expected to write an essay refers to main components of writing such as introduction, body, and concluding paragraph.

3. Writing Obstacles

Productive skill such as writing is considered as a hard effort to be done by non-native included Indonesian because it involved variety aspects to produce it. Writing in foreign language is challenging and difficult process (Alsamani & Daif-Allah, 2015) because it is expected writers to have good grammar knowledge, use appropriate vocabulary, and use appropriate capitalization, spelling and mechanic. Commonly learners face obstacles in writing because they have limited comprehension about those previous aspects; they commonly use their native stylistic into English language whereas both of these language rules are different. For example, they use wrong agreement between subject and verb, irregular past tense, tenses choice (Long & Hatcho, 2018; Singh et al., 2017a).

In addition, non-native English language commonly face problem in transferring their idea explicitly. For non-native learners, their culture affects their writing stylistic features (Nuruzaman et al., 2018; Rass, 2011). Indeed, Indonesia writers commonly abandon conveying messages which addressed to readers explicitly. Therefore, they also tend to think and write their L1 (first language) to L2 (target language) in the same way.

Somehow, Indonesia learners face enormous obstacles in writing especially in writing essay. Those obstacles come from developing idea and transferring idea into L2. Developing idea refers to learners' problems in generating idea related to topic of certain essay. It also addresses to the way of learners do to inform the readers about their message fluently. They tend to write long sentence (Rass, 2011), repeat the same subject frequently, and use limited cohesive devices to strength their message. Besides, delivering writers' motion into correct order also becomes a problem. A paragraph consists of one topic or main idea. Therefore, supporting detail must be deal with topic sentence as one point of view. But, it becomes a hard effort to arrange the sentence united whereas blending many ideas in one paragraph (Nuruzaman et al., 2018).

Many researches tend to expose either the students' proficiency in writing or students' writing errors. Somehow, this study focuses not only on learners' obstacle in writing an essay, but also presents the learners' errors in their writing. So, it can be compared between their declarations with their essay through this paper.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was case study design. It aimed to investigate learners’ obstacles in writing essay on some significant aspects of writing. There were 50 participants of this study who were randomly selected from third semester student in a private university in Indonesia. This study used two research instruments such as questionnaire and documentation. This questionnaire consisted of 28 statements from 7 indicators of writing obstacles and to triangulate the data, researchers also used documentation which taken from students’ essay writing toward a title given which was “Millennial Generation pursue higher education is merely for certificate ownership purpose, few of them are eager for self-development”.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

There are seven obstacles faced by the learners in writing essay, they are poor organization/ illogical sequences, problem of word choice, grammatical error, spelling problem, confused on supporting idea, punctuation problem, and capitalization. It could be proven by their response on questionnaire given and supported by their writing. All of them write an essay by giving their argument due to “Millennial Generation pursue higher education is merely for certificate ownership purpose, few of them are eager for self-development”.

4.1 Grammatical error

There are four problems about this part. The following figure 1 presents the students’ declaration.

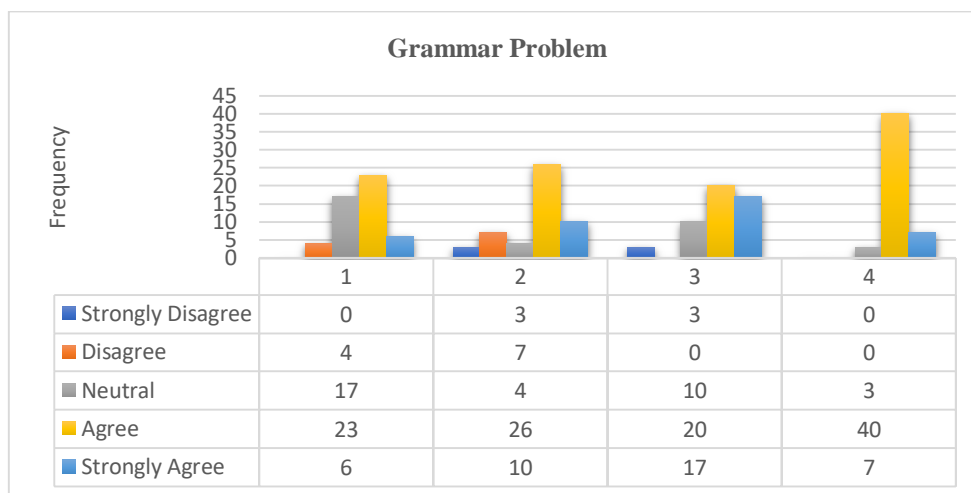


Figure 1: Grammatical Obstacle

First case is frequent problem in writing is to use correct of tenses. Based on figure 1 above, it can be seen that 23 students (46% of total number) agree that they face this obstacle in writing whereas 6 students (12%) strongly agree, and 17 students (34%) disagree. Second statement is getting difficulties of using passive voice in writing. 26 students (52% of total number) agree and 10 (20%) strongly agree that they face obstacles in using passive voice in their writing whereas 3 students (6% of total number) strongly disagree, 7 students (14% of total number) disagree and 4 students (8% of total number) neutral. Consequently, it can be concluded that almost of total number

of students declare that they have problem on passive voice. Third statement is having poor grammar make my writing not so good. 20 students (40% of total number) agree about it and 10 students (20% of total number) strongly agree with this statement whereas 3 students (6% of total number) strongly disagree and 10 students (20% of total number) neutral on this statement. Therefore, we can assume that 60 % of total number of students believe that having poor grammar will distribute negative impact on their writing. Furthermore, last statement is grammar make me waste long time to put the correct tenses in correct context. There are 40 students (80% of total number) agree with it and 7 students (14% of total number) are strongly agree on it whereas 4 students (8% of total number) strongly disagree and 3 students (6% of total number) neutral on it. However, almost of students declare that they have problem in choosing appropriate tense in appropriate context in writing essay that is why they waste their time on it.

Those statements above are in line with the students writing. Their writing is indicated have grammatical errors which have been explained as following.

1. It have not benefit at all. (√ has)
2. In conclusion, young people or millennial generation should be pursue their higher education for themselves. (√ should pursue)
3. Millennial generation are doing that based of two purpose, the first one is for getting certificate, and the second one is getting knowledge for theirselves development. (√ do that, two purposes)
4. Millenial generation want to success with higher education. (√ succeed)
5. The millennial generation are thinking if the higher education has not an important purpose for their self-development. (√ think that, does not has)
6. This generations only think how to graduate fastly and then they will bus looking for job. (√ they, faster, so, can look for, precious job, easily)
7. Many people doesn't demand truly higher education but they only want certificate ownership. (do not)
8. Our certificate will not needed by company if our brains are empty. (√ will not be)
9. We have to enjoying this process and taking a lot of sciences during in university.
(√ enjoy, take)
10. In the advanced of education, there are so many teenager which we call "millenial generation" who compete to continue their study. (√ teenagers)
11. So. in our life actualy era globalization all of part we must have it: the skill, certificate. (√ globalization era)
12. It was dangerous if we live with the laziness and do anything everything. (√ is)
13. with the technology between us, that's make easy to catch one what we want.
(√ Advanced technology in our life makes us easy to look for)
14. To sum up, Education makes us be educated person, but educated person will not lie with theirselve to fulfill society' mindset. (√ become an educated person, themselves)
15. Not only for looking for a job, certificate needed for making the same level with others. (√ certificate is needed)

16. On the other hand, some student are realized for important purpose to getting high education for develop their intelligence beside to get certificate and they also think the intelligence is important to get a great job in the future

17. (√some students realize that)

18. That because some news who says companies more prefer the candidate with high score in certificate than a candidate with a true skill. (√That is because, which say, many companies)

19. So. In our life actually era globalization all of part we must have it.(√ all of parts)

20. it just on the paper. (√ It is just on the paper)

21. In the advanced of education there are so many teenageer -which we call “millennial generation” who compete to continue their study. In higher level there are various reasons are given by them. Some of them pursue higher education only to get certificate, on the other hand others want to increase their self-development with strongly eager. (√ many teenagers, who)

4.2 Poor organization / illogical sequences

This part consists of four points to be responded by the students to analyze their obstacles. The following figure 2 presents the students’ declaration

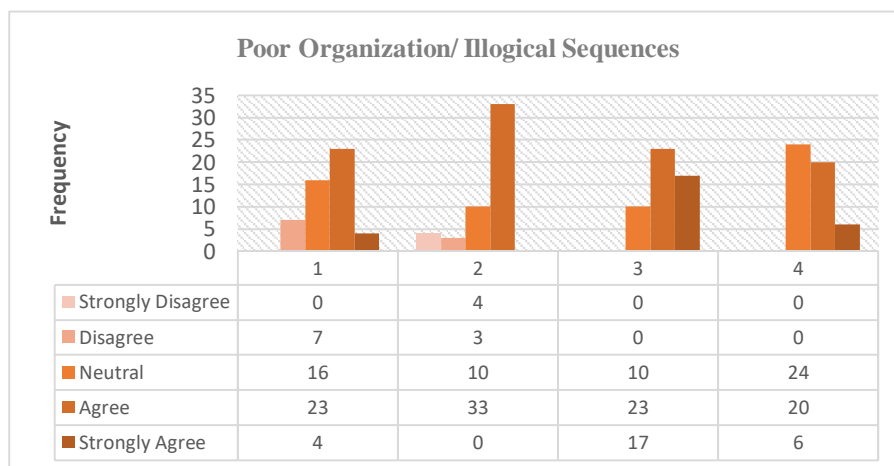


Figure 2: Organizational Obstacle

First statement is about the learners get difficulties in writing techniques (brainstorming) which are shown by 23 students (46% of total number) agree and 4 students (8% of total number) strongly agree on that statement. On the other side, there are 7 students (14% of total number) disagree, and 16 students (32% of total number) neutral on this statement. It can be concluded that (54% of total number of students) face obstacle in generating idea in the prewriting process.

Second point is about poorly writing skill to organize and sometime fail to select appropriate topic. There are 33 students (66% of total number) agree with this statement. On the other hand, 4 students (8% of total number) strongly disagree, 3 students (6% of total number) disagree and 10 students (20% of total number) neutral on this statement. Consequently, we conclude that 66% of total number of students face problem in connecting the idea with appropriate topic.

Third point is making an outline before writing. There are 23 students (46% of total number) agree and 17 students (34%) strongly agree to make outline before writing an essay. On the other side, only 10 students (20% of total number) neutral on this statement. It proves that they need to do more effort to develop certain ideas to help them write an essay easily, they cannot directly write their essay properly.

Last point is making mind mapping. There are 20 students (40% of total number) agree and 6 students (12% of total number) strongly agree on this statement whereas there are 24 students (48% of total number) neutral to make mind mapping in writing. They need to generate relevant ideas for their essay before they start writing. Moreover, based on four points above, it can be concluded that almost of the students face organization and illogical sequence obstacles in writing.

In the following section, examples of these obstacles are presented:

1. In the advanced of education there are so many teenageer -which we call “millennial generation” who compete to continue their study. In higher level there are various reasons are given by them. Some of them pursue higher education only to get certificate, on the other hand others want to increase their self-development with strongly eager. (Jumping idea occurs because the supporting sentences do not refer to topic sentence).

2. Nowadays, some people learn until higher education because of a must, to get a job that suitable for them. word widely, education is important for ourselves, and with education we can reach good attitude and then aptitude. But in nowadays, millennial generation pursues higher education just for certificate than eager for self-development. (Illogical sequence).

4.3 Problem of word choice

There are four statements of this word choice. The following figure 3 presents the students’ declaration.

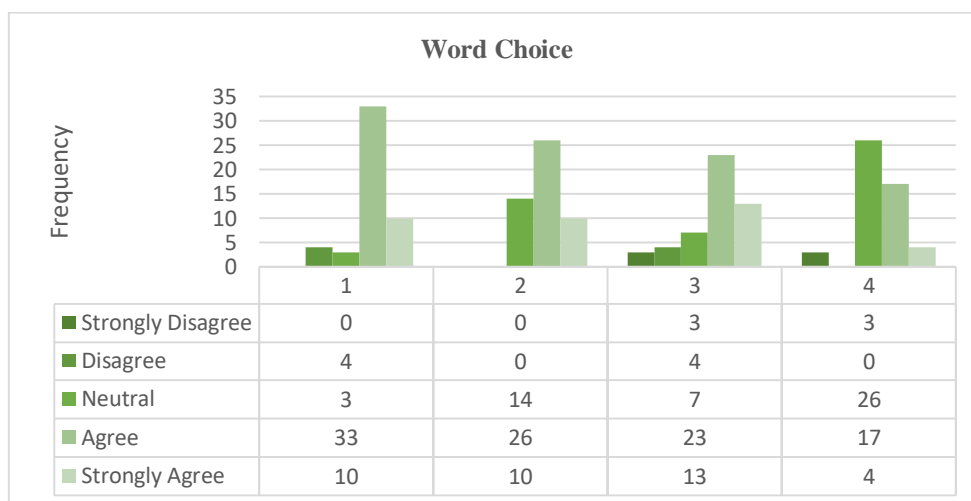


Figure.4: Word Choice Obstacle

First statement is “I always use simple words in writing”. Almost of students agree about it which approximately 33 students (66%) and strongly agree approximately 10 students (20%). It can be concluded that they are not confident to write compound or complex word in their writing because they are fear to make errors. Second statement is by using the simple words in writing make me more confident. The result shows that 24 students (48% of total number) agree with it and also 10 students (20 of total number) strongly agree. It means that

they feel more confident to use simple words in their writing than compound or complex words. Third concern is about lack of vocabularies make me get confusing in writing. There are 23 students (46% of total number) agree and 13 students (26% of total number) strongly agree on it. It shows that most of learners have limited vocabulary, so that they feel confuse to use appropriate word in appropriate context. Last statement of words choice is using new vocabularies take long time. There are 17 students (34% of total number) agree and 4 students (8% of total number) strongly agree whereas 26 students (32% of total number) neutral on this statement. However, it can be concluded that learners still have problem to use appropriate word in appropriate context and have limited vocabulary so that they feel confident to use simple word in their writing.

In the following section, examples of these obstacles are presented:

1. We have to enjoying this process and taking a lot of sciences during in university. (√ knowledge, during learning in university)
2. Our certificate will not needed by company if our brains are empty. (√ we are not qualified/ without skill)
3. Moreover, people who don't continue their study will through difficult ways to get a good job because.....to apply. (√ face)
4. Nowadays, People want to take higher education in famous institutes and get their certificate to apply job or only for prestance is a usual phenomenon. (√ common)
5. It was dangerous if we live with the laziness and do anything everything. (√ laziness habit, without doing any valuable thing)
6. With the technology between us, that's make easy to catch one what we want. (√ look for/ search, without "one")
7. To sum up, Education makes us be educated person, but educated person will not lie with theirselve to fulfill society' mindset. (√opinion)
8. In the advanced of education there are so many teenageer -which we call "millennial generation" who compete to continue their study. In higher level there are various reasons are given by them. Some of them pursue higher education only to get certificate, on the other hand others want to increase their self-development with strongly eager. (√ development)

4.4 Spelling problem

Some of learners believe that spelling is important thing in writing. The following figure 4 presents the students' declaration.

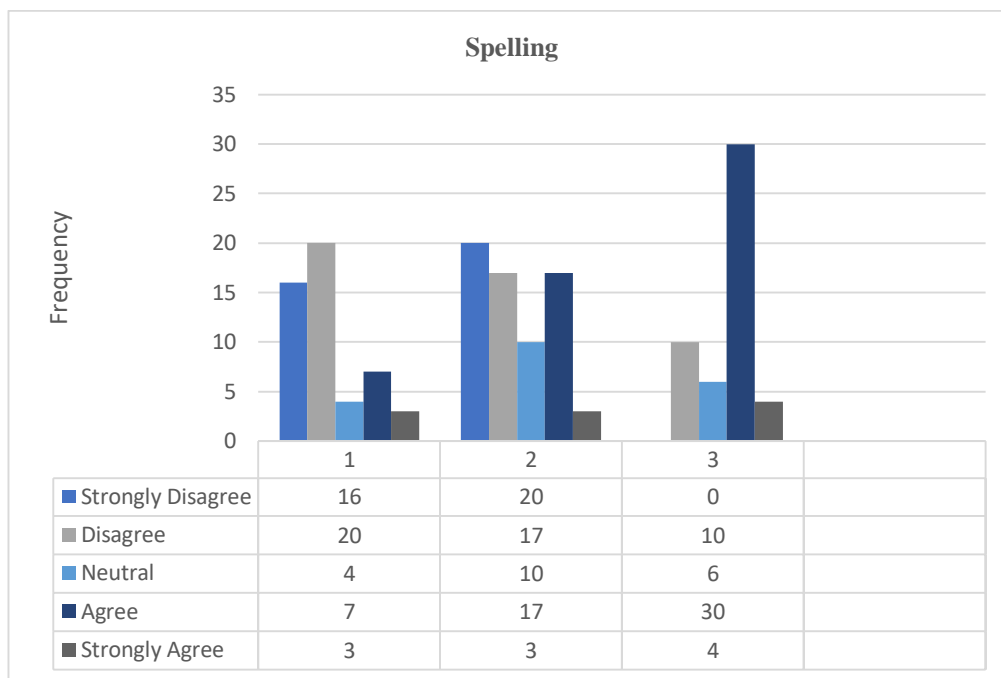


Figure 4: Spelling Obstacle

It can be proven by their statement that 20 students (40% of total number) disagree with statement of “spelling of word is not important thing in writing”, and 16 students (32 % of total number) strongly disagree on it. On the other hand, 7 students (14% of total number), 3 students (6% of total number) strongly agree on this statement while 4 students (8% of total number) neutral. They also feel difficult to check their spelling that is strengthened by another statement that 17 students (34% of total number) agree and 3 students (6% of total number) strongly agree that they get difficulties in checking spelling of new words. Despite of that agreement, there 20 students (40% of total number) strongly disagree, 17 students (34% of total number) disagree and 10 students (20% of total number) neutral on it. Furthermore, 30 students (60% of total number) reviewed their writing and checked their spelling before they submit their writing. But in the same time, they also feel that checking spelling of word take long time for them.

In the following section, examples of these obstacles are presented:

1. Millenial generation want to success with higher education (√ Millennial)
2. So, young people exited to pursue higher education for self-development. (√ excited)
3. In the advanced of education, there are so many teenager - which we call “millenial generation” who compete to continue their study. (√ development, millennial)
4. Nowaday, People want to take higher education in famous institutes and get their certificate to apply job or only for prestice is a usual phenomenon. (√ Nowadays, prestige)
5. So, in our life actualy era globalization all of part we must have it: the skill, certificate. (√ actually)
6. In addition, millennial generation has so many ways to be success, such as be entrepreneur, artist, etc. (Millennial)

4.5 Confusion on supporting idea

Some problems are faced by the learners in constructing supporting details. The following figure 5 presents the students' declaration.

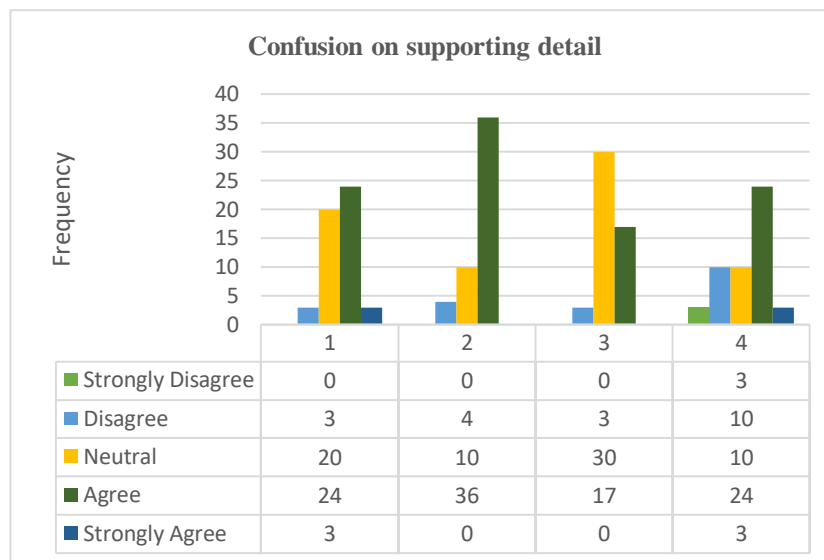


Figure 5: Confusion on Supporting Detail

Figure above show that 24 students (48% of total number) consider that they face problems in constructing and arranging the words into appropriate supporting details. It is also supported by 3 students (6% of total number), they strongly agree on that statement. Next statement is responded by 36 students (72% of total number), they agree that I face many problems constructing the words in making supporting the ideas whereas 10 students (20% of total number) neutral and 4 students (8% of total number) disagree on it. Another difficulty is “I am difficult to define what items that related to the topic”. There are 17 students (34% of total number) learners agree on it whereas 30 students (60% of total number) neutral on it. Despite of their neutral agreement, their writing reflect that a few jumping ideas appear in their essay. Next statement is responded by 24 students (48% of total number) by agreement that they get confuse to develop supporting sentence and 3 students (6% of total number) strongly agree on that statement.

In the following section, examples of these obstacles are presented:

1. So. in our life actualy era globalization all of part we must have it: the skill, certificate. (√ So, it can be concluded that both of certificate and skill are important in globalization era)
2. It was dangerous if we live with the laziness and do anything everything.
(√ It is dangerous if we live with laziness habit without doing any valuable thing)
3. In fact, a lot of now generation think that they need certificate for working, for making same the level with the others. (√ In fact, a lot of Millennial Generation think that they need certificate to seek for good job and set their good position in society to be respectful)
4. On the other hand, some student are realized for important purpose to getting high education for develop their intelligence beside to get certificate and they also think the intelligence is important to get a great job in the future.

(On the other hand, some students realize that the most important thing in higher education level is not only to get certificate but also developing their intelligence to get great job in the future)

5. That because some news who says companies more prefer the candidate with high score in certificate than a candidate with a true skill. (It is caused by certain opinion in society as good qualification in certificate more valuable than personal competence).

4.6 Punctuation problem

Almost of learners disagree that punctuation is difficult thing. But actually, their writing still presents some punctuation problems. The following figure 6 presents the students' declaration.

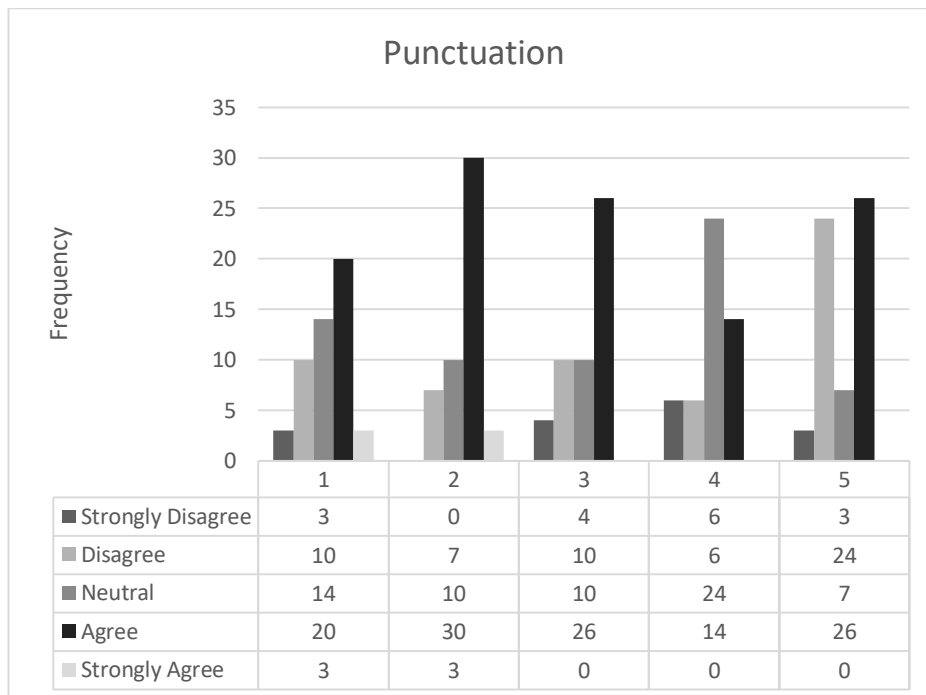


Figure 6: Punctuation Obstacle

However, they still produce some mistakes of using comma and full stop. In addition, they often omit comma in complex sentence and after adverb in the beginning of sentence.

In the following section, examples of these obstacles are presented:

1. In the advanced of education, there are so many teenager - which we call “millenial generation” who compete to continue their study. (√ without -)

2. So₂ in our life actualy era globalization all of part we must have it₂ the skill₂ certificate. (√ [,] [;] [without , but it should be substituted by and])

3. As people who live in this millennial era we have to be smart people. (√ era,)

4. So. In our life actualy era globalization all of part we must have it. (√So,)

5. In the advanced of education there are so many teenager -which we call “millennial generation” who compete to continue their study. In higher level there are various reasons are given by them. Some of them pursue higher education only to get certificate, on the other hand others want to increase their self-development with strongly eager. (√ teenager who)

4.7 Capitalization

Capitalization is considered as an easiest part in writing but almost of students believe that capitalization is important in writing. Further information about finding can be seen in the following figure 7.

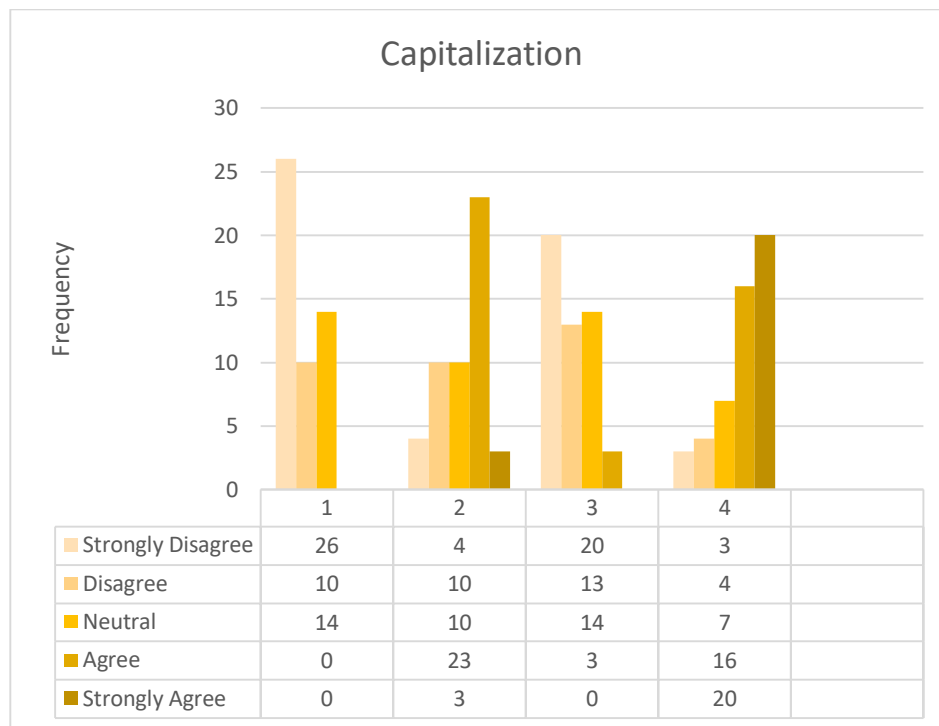


Figure 7: Capitalization Obstacle

Figure above presents that for the first statement, there are 26 students (32% of total number) strongly disagree about that statement and 10 students (20% of total number). Besides, there are 14 students (28% of total number) neutral on it. Second statement of this part is “Sometimes forget to put capitalization after full stop”. There are 23 students (46% of students number) agree, and 3 students (6% of total number) strongly agree while 10 students (20% of total number) neutral. On the other hand, there are 10 students (20% of total number) disagree and 4 students (8% of total number) strongly disagree on it. Next statement is “Getting confused to put capitalization in the first letter name of city”. There are 20 students (40% of total number) strongly disagree and 13 students (26% of total number) disagree on it whereas 14 students (28% of total number) neutral, and 3 students (6% of total number) agree on it. The last statement is, “Capitalization is needed in the first letter of person’s name”. There are 20 students (40% of total number) strongly agree and 16 students (32% of total number) agree on it. On the other hand, 3 students (6% of total number) strongly disagree and 4 students (8% of total number) disagree while 7 students (14% of total number) neutral on it. However, various perception of using capitalization can be proved by their writing. Even though some of them say that they do not have problem with it, they even produce many errors in using capitalization into writing. For example, they use small letter for proper noun, small letter for proper noun and first letter after full stop.

In the following section, examples of these obstacles are presented:

1. he can learn everything...skill. (√ He)
2. with the technology between us, that’s make easy to catch one what we want.

(√ With)

3. To sum up, Education makesmindset. (√ education)

4. they are better thanpurpose. (√ They)

5. In addition, millennial generation has so many waysetc. (√ Millennial Generation)

6. on the other hand, some student are realized for important purpose to getting high education for develop their intelligence beside to get certificate and they also think the intelligence is important to get a great job in the future.

(√ On the other hand)

7. To sum up, Education makes us be educated person, but educated person will not lie with theirselves to fulfill society' mindset (√education)

8. it just on the paper. (√ It)

9. Nowadays, some people learn until higher education because of a must, to get a job that suitable for them. word widely, education is important for ourselves, and with education we can reach good attitude and then aptitude. But in nowadays, millennial generation pursues higher education just for certificate than eager for self-development. (√World wide)

V. CONCLUSION

In view of data presentation, it can be concluded that as following:

a. There are seven obstacles faced by third semester students due to writing essay e.g. poor organization/ illogical sequences, problem of word choice, grammatical error, spelling problem, confused on supporting idea, punctuation problem, and capitalization.

b. The highest problem is grammatical errors regarding learners' declaration on questionnaire and learners' essay writing. There are 80% of students agree with it and it also can be documented that grammatical problem is dominantly appear in learners' writing.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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