

## Exploring EFL Students' Difficulties in Writing Compare and Contrast Essays

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### ABSTRACT

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine second-year university EFL students' perceptions of difficulties in organizing compare and contrast essays. The research aimed to identify which parts of the essay; introduction, body, or conclusion that students perceive as most challenging and to explore specific difficulties encountered in writing each section. A total of 40 second year university students participated in the study. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire administered via Google form after the midterm examination. Descriptive statistics, particularly percentage analysis, were used to analyze students' responses. The findings indicate that students perceived the body paragraph as the most challenging section, primarily due to difficulties in organizing ideas coherently, developing supporting details, and using appropriate transitions. In contrast, students expressed higher confidence in writing the introduction and conclusion, demonstrating familiarity with thesis formulation, hooks, and summarizing key points. These results suggest that EFL instruction should emphasize strategies for improving coherence, paragraph organization, and transitional skills, particularly in body paragraphs, to enhance students' overall essay writing performance.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most challenging abilities for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is writing. Students must simultaneously utilize proper grammar, vocabulary, organization, and coherent ideas. Writing continues to be the most difficult language skill for many EFL students because it requires the integration of linguistic precision, logical thinking, and originality, as observed by Tursina (2016, 2018, 2019). Among the different types of essays, the compare and contrast essay is often considered one of the most demanding because it asks students to identify similarities and differences between two topics while keeping their writing coherent and well-organized. At the university where this

study was conducted, second-year students learn this essay type through lessons on its purpose, structure, and organization, following models such as those by Oshima and Hogue (2006), which emphasize a step-by-step process for essay development. Even though the teaching process is systematic, many students still find it hard to apply what they have learned when writing compare and contrast essays. Classroom observations in 2025 revealed that second-year university students often face problems organizing their ideas, choosing suitable comparison patterns, and using transitions to connect ideas clearly. They also struggle to write strong thesis statements and balanced comparisons between points. These findings are supported by Toba, Noor, and Sanu (2019), who reported that Indonesian EFL students usually perform well in grammar and vocabulary but have weaknesses in organization and coherence. Similarly, Karimnia (2024) found that Iranian EFL students understand essay formats but still struggle with using transitions and maintaining logical flow. More recent studies (Putri, Hadiyanto, & Mali, 2024; Pratama & Hastuti, 2024) have also shown that students continue to face challenges in organizing and expressing ideas clearly, even when given teacher or AI-assisted feedback. These studies indicate that organization remains one of the major barriers in EFL writing development.

Another continuing issue in EFL academic writing is the absence of a clear authorial voice, which reflects how writers express their stance, identity, and engagement with ideas in their texts. Recent scholarship highlights that expressing a clear stance is one of the most demanding aspects of L2 writing because it requires both linguistic and rhetorical awareness (Lee & Deakin, 2016; Zhao & Wu, 2024). Tikhonova and Raitskaya (2025) argue that developing authorial identity is central to academic literacy and that students need explicit instruction to position themselves confidently in their writing. However, many EFL learners still struggle to project their own voices. Divsar and Amirsoleimani (2020) found that reflective and dialogic learning activities can enhance students' ability to express personal stance in argumentative essays, but developing a consistent and confident authorial voice remains a challenge.

Similarly, Sukandi (2020) and Aldafas (2023) discovered that both Indonesian and Middle Eastern EFL students often produce formulaic essays that list similarities and differences without deeper analysis or interpretation. Su and Zou (2022) also confirmed that while technology-assisted writing improves grammatical accuracy, it does not necessarily enhance students' critical engagement or personal expression. Likewise, Sudirman, Gemilang, and Kristanto (2021) reported that Indonesian students' writing frequently lacks distinct self-representation and evaluative stance, particularly in structured genres such as compare and contrast essays. Overall, these studies indicate that while EFL writing instruction has advanced in language and structure, developing students' authorial voice and critical interpretation remains a persistent challenge especially in academic genres where meaningful analysis and personal stance are essential.

Although recent studies have explored various writing challenges, most have focused on general essay difficulties such as grammar, cohesion, or overall writing performance (Batubara, & Fithriani, 2023; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Putri et al., 2024). Few studies have examined which specific part of the essay' such as introduction, body, or conclusion is

considered most difficult by students. Moreover, earlier research has rarely combined students' self-perceptions with classroom-based observations, which could provide a more complete picture of their writing problems. To fill this gap, the present study investigates second-year university EFL students' perceptions of their difficulties in writing compare and contrast essays, focusing on both organizational and voice-related challenges. By integrating students' reflections and real classroom observations, this study aims to provide practical insights for improving the teaching of essay writing in intermediate EFL contexts.

This study set out to find the gap in the EFL research through the following research questions: 1) Which part of the compare and contrast essay (introduction, body, or conclusion) is perceived as the most challenging by second-year university EFL students? and 2) What specific difficulties do students encounter in writing a compare and contrast essay?

## **2. Research Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine students' perceptions of the difficulties they face when organizing compare and contrast essays. The purpose of this design was to describe the existing learning conditions and gather numerical data that represent students' experiences and writing challenges (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). A survey method was selected as the primary tool for data collection, as it enables researchers to efficiently gather structured information about participants' attitudes and perceptions in a measurable form (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2019). Through this approach, the study sought to provide an objective description of the specific areas in which students struggle with essay organization.

The research took place in the English Education Department of a university that offers an intermediate writing course. The compare and contrast essay unit was delivered in four meetings, covering the essay's purpose, structure (introduction, body, and conclusion), and key writing components such as thesis statement development, coherence, and transition signals. Instruction in this course followed a process-writing approach that emphasized planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Hyland, 2019; Zhang & Zhang, 2021). After students completed their midterm exams, a survey was administered to gather reflections on their learning experiences and writing difficulties. This timing ensured that the participants had adequate instruction and practice before providing feedback on the challenges they encountered.

The population of the study comprised students from the English Education Department at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method appropriate for identifying individuals who have direct experience and understanding of the research topic (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The study focused on second-year students enrolled in the intermediate writing course during the 2024/2025 academic year. All students in this course were invited to participate voluntarily, and only fully completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis. A total of 40 students

participated, representing a relevant group for understanding the perceived challenges in essay organization.

The primary instrument for data collection was a questionnaire consisting of two major sections. The first section contained 15 close-ended items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). These items evaluated students' perceptions of their ability to organize different parts of a compare and contrast essay, including prewriting (Items 1–2), introduction (Items 3–5), body paragraphs (Items 6–12), and conclusion (Items 13–15). The questions addressed aspects such as idea generation, thesis formulation, logical balance, transition use, and summary writing. The second section included two open-ended questions that allowed students to elaborate on the most difficult aspects of writing this essay type. To ensure clarity and reliability, the questionnaire was validated by two academic writing experts and piloted with a small group of students before distribution (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2019).

Data were collected using Google Forms after students completed their midterm examinations. The questionnaire link was distributed digitally, and participants were informed about the research purpose, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality ([https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/d/1iQM1AGusudWYKHhXxOGsMx29aw0sl2NLx2EUc31-WA/viewform?edit\\_requested=true](https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/d/1iQM1AGusudWYKHhXxOGsMx29aw0sl2NLx2EUc31-WA/viewform?edit_requested=true)). All responses were submitted anonymously and used solely for academic purposes (Cohen et al., 2018). Completing the survey required approximately 15–20 minutes, and data collection took place on April 29, 2025. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, focusing on percentage analysis to identify which sections of the essay students found most difficult to organize.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

RQ 1: Which part of the compare and contrast essay (introduction, body, or conclusion) is perceived as the most challenging by second-year university EFL students?

The findings reveal that students generally perceived the Venn diagram as a useful prewriting tool for organizing ideas before writing a compare and contrast essay. As shown in Table 2, 85% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that it helped them organize their ideas, while 80% stated that it allowed them to clearly identify similarities and differences between two topics. This result indicates that students recognize the importance of planning as a foundation for essay organization, supporting the emphasis of Oshima and Hogue's (2006) model on prewriting as an essential step in developing coherent compositions.

In the introduction, students showed positive perceptions and relatively strong confidence. Most respondents agreed that a strong hook makes them more interested in writing and that they understood the function of a thesis statement. Approximately two-thirds also reported confidence in writing thesis statements that compare and contrast two topics. This suggests that students are familiar with the structural expectations of the introduction and view it as a manageable part of the essay. These findings align with Toba, Noor, and Sanu (2019), who noted that EFL learners often perform better in tasks involving clearly defined structural features than in more complex organizational tasks.

In contrast, the body paragraph was perceived as the most challenging section. Although students generally understood the purpose of topic sentences and were familiar with block and point-by-point structures, they reported difficulties in developing detailed supporting ideas and ensuring smooth transitions between points. Only 55% expressed confidence in linking ideas coherently, while 20% disagreed. This confirms previous observations (Tursina, 2016; Karimnia, 2024; Putri, Hadiyanto, & Mali, 2024) that many EFL students struggle with organization and coherence, particularly in elaborating comparisons and maintaining logical flow. These challenges may stem from limited exposure to cohesive devices and insufficient practice in applying organizational strategies within authentic writing contexts. The results also support Su and Zou (2022), who found that while technological and procedural support can improve surface accuracy, it does not automatically enhance organizational coherence or analytical depth.

For the conclusion, most students understood its purpose and valued its role in summarizing key points. However, confidence levels varied: 65% agreed or strongly agreed that they could write an effective conclusion, while 22.5% remained neutral and 12.5% expressed uncertainty. Although students recognized that a good conclusion helps readers understand the essay's overall purpose (87.5% agreement), some still struggled to produce cohesive summaries that synthesize rather than merely restate ideas. This echoes findings by Piscayanti et al. (2024), who observed that EFL writers often have difficulty integrating personal interpretation and closure in structured genres.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the body paragraph is the most challenging part of the compare and contrast essay for second-year EFL students. The difficulty lies mainly in organizing ideas coherently, using appropriate transitions, and elaborating supporting details elements central to cohesion and logical flow. This confirms the argument by Tursina (2019) and Pasaribu, Pasaribu, Siahaan, & Sitompul, (2024) that EFL students' primary writing problems are not only linguistic but also rhetorical and organizational. In contrast, students felt more confident in composing introductions and conclusions, which involve clearer formulaic structures. These results suggest that writing instruction for EFL learners should place greater emphasis on developing coherence within body paragraphs, providing explicit modeling of transitions, and offering scaffold practice in linking ideas across comparison points.

**RQ 2: What specific difficulties do students encounter in writing a compare and contrast essay?**

The findings from the survey indicate that second-year university EFL students experience different levels of difficulty across the three main sections of a compare and contrast essay. As shown in Table 5, 60% of the participants reported the body paragraph as the most challenging part, followed by the introduction (22.5%) and the conclusion (17.5%). These results confirm that students' primary challenges lie in the organizational aspects of essay writing rather than in the mechanical or grammatical components.

The body paragraph presented the most significant source of difficulty for students. Many respondents reported challenges in organizing similarities and differences logically using

either the block or point-by-point method. They often struggled to maintain coherence, apply appropriate transition signals, and balance the discussion between the two subjects. These difficulties reflect issues of rhetorical organization and cohesion that are widely discussed in EFL writing research. As Tursina (2018, 2019) and Karimnia (2024) pointed out, EFL students frequently find it hard to construct coherent argument structures because they lack experience in using transitions and connectors that create logical flow. Similarly, Putri, Hadiyanto, and Mali (2024) observed that even when students understand essay formats, they tend to have trouble elaborating comparisons meaningfully, which limits analytical depth. The current study supports these findings, emphasizing that effective organization remains a major challenge in students' writing development.

In terms of the introduction, 22.5% of respondents reported difficulty composing a strong opening paragraph. Their main struggles included formulating an engaging hook, introducing two topics in a balanced way, and writing a clear thesis statement that reflects both comparison and contrast. These problems may stem from limited awareness of rhetorical purpose and lack of exposure to model texts. This aligns with the observations of Toba, Noor, and Sanu (2019), who found that while EFL students can follow essay templates, they often struggle to express the central idea of comparison clearly in the thesis. As a result, students' introductions sometimes lack focus or fail to set up a clear direction for the essay.

The conclusion was identified as the least challenging part, yet 17.5% of the students still reported difficulties in this section. They struggled to summarize the key points effectively and restate the thesis without unnecessary repetition. Some students were also unsure about how to end the essay with a reflective or evaluative comment. These findings correspond to those of Sudirman, Gemilang, and Kristanto (2021) who observed that many EFL learners' conclusions tend to be mechanical and lack synthesis or personal engagement. This suggests that while students understand the basic structural function of a conclusion, they need more guidance in producing a cohesive and reflective closing paragraph.

Overall, the findings reinforce that organizational and coherence-related difficulties are the most significant barriers in EFL students' writing of compare and contrast essays. The body paragraph emerged as the most problematic section because it requires higher-order cognitive and rhetorical skills such as organizing, connecting, and balancing ideas. These results are consistent with earlier studies (Su & Zou, 2022; Pasaribu, Pasaribu, Siahaan, & Sitompul, 2024; Tursina, 2016), which emphasize that organization and coherence are central challenges in EFL writing. Therefore, focused instruction on paragraph organization, transitions, and idea balance supported by explicit modeling and guided practice can help students overcome these difficulties and achieve greater clarity in their compare and contrast essays.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The findings indicate that second-year EFL students perceive the body paragraph as the most challenging part of a compare and contrast essay. While students showed confidence in writing introductions and conclusions, particularly in crafting hooks and thesis statements or

summarizing key points, they struggled with organizing ideas coherently within body paragraphs, developing detailed supporting ideas, and using smooth transitions. This suggests that although students understand structural expectations conceptually, they face difficulties in applying organizational and cohesive strategies in practice, confirming that instructional emphasis should focus on enhancing coherence, logical flow, and connection of ideas in the body of the essay.

In addition, the study also reveals that students encounter varying difficulties across essay sections, with the greatest challenges in body paragraphs (60%), followed by the introduction (22.5%) and conclusion (17.5%). These difficulties primarily relate to organizing similarities and differences, maintaining coherence, balancing ideas, and effectively using transitions. While students are relatively more confident in writing introductions and conclusions, their struggles in body paragraph development highlight the need for targeted instructional support, including explicit modeling, scaffold practice, and guidance in linking ideas and elaborating comparisons to improve overall essay quality.

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