

Investigating the Students' Writing Ability in Responding to Environmental Issue

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to investigate Foreign Language (FL) learners' ability in writing an essay by using an environmental topic in terms of how they write the introduction, the body of the piece, and conclusion through content analysis design. Twenty-nine students, who took an academic writing class in the academic year 2019-2020 in a private College of Teachers Training and Education (STKIP PGRI) in Pasuruan, Indonesia, become the sample of the study. The result shows that to write the introductory paragraph, the majority of the students (69%) uses general way to open the essay, while the rest prefers questions (24%) and anecdote (7%). The result also shows that almost all the students can state their thesis statement (97%). The body of the essay is organized by using a cause-effect relationship (17%), reasoning (38%), problem-solution (10%), and the combination of those (35%). Moreover, almost all the paragraphs in the body of the essay have their topic sentences (90%). In terms of the concluding section, all students can provide proper conclusions for their essays by using recommendation or advice (48%), summary (48%), and hope (4%). In sum, using an environmental topic can help the students to write better because the issue is close and personal. Furthermore, the issue triggers students' self-awareness to protect their environment.

Keywords: environmental issue, essay, writing ability, writing elements

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Introduction

The world nowadays suffers from environmental damage. Natural evolution and human activities are two significant causes to ecological problems (Sukmawan & Setyowati, 2017). Yet, mostly, the environmental destruction is caused by human unfriendly behavior toward life, to name a few, such as illegal logging, forest fire, land conversion, polluting rivers, and sea with litters and chemical substances, and the excessive use of plastics.

The environmental issue in education is not something new. The environmental problems have attracted the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) long ago and made them held the 1st conference on Environmental education in cooperation with the U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) in Tbilisi in 1977 (Unesco, 1977). There are five objectives of ecological education set by UNESCO-UNEP in 1977, namely awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills, evaluative ability, and participation (Unesco, 1977). The declaration sets out 12 guiding principles of how environmental education should be implemented. The guiding principles, among others, are to enable learners 1) discover the environmental problems' symptoms and causes, 2) be aware of the complexity of the ecological issues, 3) propose critical thinking and problem-solving skills to give solutions, and 4) utilize various learning environments to learn about the environment to preserve nature (Unesco, 1977). In sum, participation and action are the key elements for ecological protection.

With the increased damage to the environment nowadays, the need to educate the future generation about environmental protection is becoming urgent. As stated by Bromley, Lerch, & Jimenez (2016), the possible way to do this is through formal schooling as it gives a chance for teachers to include the environmental topics in the learning materials. Furthermore, Gürsoy & Saglam (2011) argue that within the scope of socially responsible teaching (SRT), teachers have the responsibility to cultivate learners' awareness on global issues, in which environmental problem is among them. Pratama & Yuliaty (2016) suggest that teachers should not only focus only on the academic side of the learners, but they should also focus on the learners' affective side, such as being responsible for their surroundings, understanding, caring, and having a respectful attitude both to people and nature.

Language teachers can take part in the teaching of environmental awareness. As stated by Cates (1992), language teachers need to prepare future generations with the challenges they might face and how to solve them. He further suggests that language teachers can take part in making the world a better place while at the same time, help the learners improve their language proficiency. One way of doing this involves global topics in the curricula, especially in the learning materials and teaching approaches. In the area of teaching a foreign and a second language context, incorporating environmental issues is not something new. Research shows that teachers can integrate environmental problems and subject matter. Gürsoy (2010) states that environmental education is applicable in content-based and theme-based instruction. Furthermore, Hauschild, Poltavchenko, & Stoller (2012) suggest that different teaching approaches for language instruction can use environmental issues. Meanwhile, Setyowati & Widiati (2014) incorporated an ecological issue for teaching writing by using a Genre-Based approach. Others propose the use of literature for teaching environmental education (Lustyantie, 2015; Sukmawan & Setyowati, 2017). These show that

the use of environmental issues is highly applicable for teaching language skills while at the same time, enhancing the learners' ecological awareness.

Research on writing elements is abundant. Mostly, it focuses on the students' ability to write an introductory paragraph (Umunakwe & Pitse, 2017) and the quality of introductory and concluding paragraphs (Townsend, Hicks, Thompson, Wilton, Tuck, & Moore, 1993). Other research stresses the students' structural part types for paragraph writing (Yunhadi, 2016), and difficulties in writing a well-organized paragraph (Alharbi, 2019). While some others investigate the overall quality of students' essays (Qonitatu, 2016; Setyowati, 2016). Yet, no research is interested in investigating the students' essay quality when they write about an environmental issue. Thus, the aims of the present research are to describe 1) the students' ability in writing an introductory paragraph, 2) the students' proficiency to develop the body of the essay, and 3) the students' ability to write concluding paragraphs.

Literature Review

The Essay Elements

An essay has three major parts, namely the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. In the first part of the piece, the introductory paragraph is very essential. For the readers, it gives the first impression and provides a context about the discussion that follows, while for the writer, the first paragraph offers a frame to the body of the essay (Murray, 2012). In the introductory paragraph, there is a thesis statement. The thesis statement governs the whole piece, and its place is usually at the end of the introductory paragraph (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Bastola, 2018). Yet, writing a good introductory paragraph is not easy (Murray, 2012). As stated by Harvey (2009), an excellent introductory paragraph provides motives or reasons for the readers whether they want and need to read the essay or not. Thus, the writer should 'hook' them to continue reading (Savage & Mayer, 2006), which is called the hook strategies.

There are several ways to hook the readers' attention. As stated by Savage & Mayer (2006), the writer can use a story or anecdote, a question, a statement, or a fact to open the essay. Another way to hook the reader is by using a general comment or the 'funnel introduction' (Oshima & Hogue, 2007, p.151). The public report gives background information about the topic before it goes down to a specific one. The second part of the essay is the body. Oshima & Hogue (2007) claim that the shape of the piece is typically made up of one or more paragraphs. They further state that in each frame of the section, there should be a topic sentence and several supporting sentences. According to Savage & Mayer (2006), the supporting sentences in the body of the essay presents reasons, facts, and explanations. In sum, the organization should discuss the main idea, as stated in the thesis statement. The theme should be developed in such a way so that it is meaningful and logical. There are several ways to form paragraphs. The paragraphs can be generated by using spatial order (descriptive writing), time order (process writing), comparison and contrast order, and definition order (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Similarly, Savage & Mayer (2006) assert that the organization of an essay can use descriptive, narrative (chronological order), and opinion organization (reasons, facts, examples, comparison-contrast, cause-effect relationship). Besides, according to Gugin (2014), a paragraph can also be organized based on the order of importance and exemplification/illustration organization. As stated by Gray (2019), a good piece of writing

typically consists of a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and sometimes, a concluding sentence.

The last part of an essay is the conclusion. Oshima & Hogue (2007) claim that there are three purposes of the concluding paragraph, namely to show the readers that the writing has reached its end, to remind the readers about the main points of the piece, and to leave readers with the final thoughts about the topic. Thus, there are several ways to write a concluding paragraph. The concluding section may summarize the main idea, make a prediction, restate the writer's opinion, give suggestions or advice, and hope connected to the topic, (Zemach & Islam, 2004; Savage & Mayer, 2006). Oshima & Hogue (2007) give guidance on how to make a proper conclusion. According to them, there are two parts of a concluding paragraph. The first part talks about the main points or restating the thesis statement in different words, while in the second part, the writer gives the final thoughts or comments about the topic discussed previously without providing any new ideas.

Previous Research on Writing Elements

Research on writing elements both in the native language and foreign-language context are scarce in the literature. Townsend et al., (1993) investigate how and to what degree the introduction and the conclusion affect the grading of the composition. The result shows that the quality of the introduction section is more influential in the classification awarded for an essay rather than the conclusion. Secondly, Umunnakwe & Pitse (2017) conduct a study to find out the students' ability to write an introduction for academic writing at the University of Botswana. The result reveals that, aside from the lack of plan development in the introductory paragraph, making a thesis statement becomes the main problem in writing the essay. The result of their study also reveals that the students are not able to write a well-constructed introductory paragraph as the majority of the piece has no thesis statement. They suggest that the writing teacher should give a step by step guide to help the students write better.

A new study is conducted by Alharbi (2019), who explores the students' difficulties in writing a well-written paragraph for academic writing in the EFL Saudi context. The result reveals that the typical problems the students encounter in academic writing are mechanics (spelling and punctuation), grammar, topic sentences, and supporting sentences. He suggests that the writing teacher should consider the students' difficulties and challenges in writing before designing a writing course to be able to get a maximum result. Research also reveals that there is a correlation between critical thinking skill and writing quality. Nikou, Boyadi, & Amirikar (2015), claim that the relationship between analysis skill and writing quality is significant. It means that the more the students have the critical thinking skill in terms of analytical ability, the better the writing quality will be.

In the Indonesian context, where English is taught as the foreign language (EFL), few research is conducted investigating the students' ability in writing paragraphs. Firstly, Rahmatunisa (2014) finds that Indonesian EFL learners have some problems in writing. Aside from the linguistic difficulties, the Indonesian EFL learners have questions in organizing the paragraph and making conclusions. Yunhadi (2016) conducts a study to investigate the students' basic part types during their paragraph writing class in Kutai Kertanegara University. His

document analysis reveals that the students do not have adequate practical knowledge of how to write a good and unified paragraph. The study also yields that the students have problems in writing a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. Thirdly, Qonitaton (2016) investigates the students' ability to write an essay at Widyagama University. The result shows that the students' ability to write an essay is poor even though they have passed the prerequisite courses in writing, such as sentence-level writing, paragraph writing, and essay writing. Her study also reveals that the students perform poorly in essay organization and paragraph development. Moreover, most of them cannot provide a conclusion for their essay. The newer study is conducted by Budiharso (2017), who develops a writing prompt and scoring rubric for argumentative essay. Through research and development procedure design, he concludes that the development of a writing prompt should be accompanied with the development of scoring rubric appropriate with the prompt. The descriptors of the rubric, in his opinion, should refer to the characteristics of a good paragraph, such as topic sentence and controlling ideas, ideas development, and concluding sentences. Meanwhile, the descriptors of an essay in the scoring rubric should focus on the essay elements, such as the introductory paragraph with its thesis statement, the body of the piece, and the concluding section.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach focusing on content analysis design. According to Hemphill, Richards, Templin, & Blankenship (2012), content analysis design typically used interviews, observations, and document or artifact analysis to collect the data. However, in the present study, the researchers used document analysis as the main instrument. The researchers took the students' composition after they were assigned to write a short essay responding to a topic about the use of plastic packaging in everyday life. The writing lecturer chose this topic because one of the environmental problems experienced by modern society is the excessive use of plastic for everyday life.

The writing prompt gave a short description on the use of plastic for food packaging, and the students had to give their response about it. The prompt also said that they were free to use the gadget to look for difficult words and to read and quote references relevant to their topic to support their claim. The time to finish the writing was 90 minutes starting from pre-writing activities to collecting the work. The students' compositions were taken by the researchers directly after they submitted their essay. The data collection was done in September 2019. The subjects of the study were 29 students who join academic writing class in the academic year 2019-2020 in a private College of Teachers Training and Education (STKIP PGRI) in Pasuruan, Indonesia.

The researchers used qualitative analysis since the data were in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. The data codification was written based on its category, namely the students' name (initials and the last three digits of the registration number), and the part of the essay (the introduction, the body, and the conclusion). The researchers follow Miles & Huberman's (1994) model in qualitative analysis, namely data collection, data display, data reduction, and conclusion drawing. The present study also uses descriptive quantitative analysis to answer the research question thoroughly by using the tally system.

Finding and Discussion

Introductory paragraph

There are many ways to write the introductory paragraph for an essay. Savage & Mayer (2006) state that at least there are four ways to start the opening paragraph, namely using an anecdote, a question, a statement or a fact. Meanwhile, Oshima & Hogue (2007, p.151) proposes the 'funnel' way to start an essay as figure 1 shows:

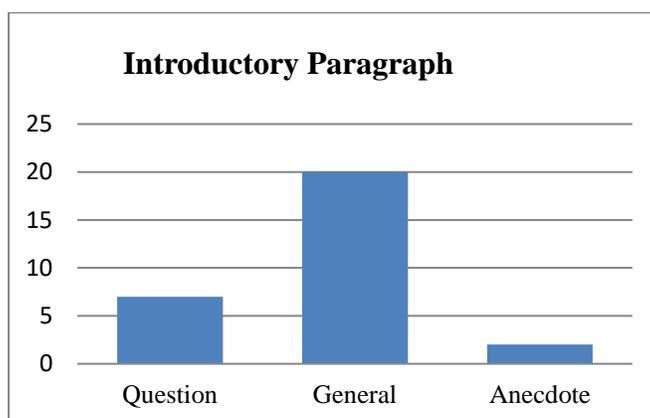


Figure 1. The type of opening

In the present study, the hook strategy used by the students is to open the essay by using question type, general statement type, and anecdote type. Figure 1 shows that the majority of the students prefer to start the article by using public information (69%), while the rest uses questions (24%) and anecdotes (7%). The data shows that the 'funnel introduction' (Oshima & Hogue, 2007) appears to be the easiest way to start the essay.

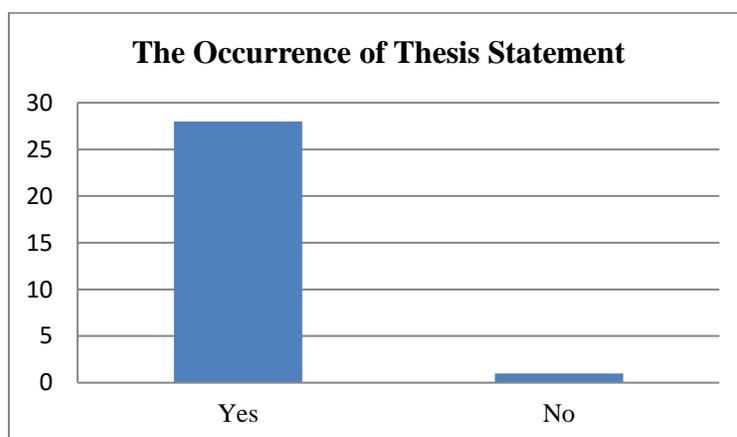


Figure 2. The thesis statement

Almost all the students, state their thesis statement the introductory paragraph. Only one student who is not able to state the thesis statement. The students have sufficient ability to create the thesis statement because they have experienced paragraphs and essay writing courses before. Based on the result of the interview, the students said that they have learnt how to make a topic sentence in the paragraph writing class, and a thesis statement in the essay

writing course. Moreover, the students said that the writing prompt is very obvious, that they can use it as the thesis statement. The writing prompt states, "Give your reasons why we should minimize the use of plastics and how to do it".

The students' thesis statements are written like these "we should minimize the use of plastic because..." or "we should minimize the use of plastic to...". This shows that a clear writing prompt plays a vital role in directing what the students should write in the essay. The sample of one of the student's introductory paragraph in the composition is presented in the following excerpt.

The use of plastic has indeed become a normal part of human life. The material is lightweight, and its practical use makes plastic usage increasing Every day. As we look around us, plastic is everywhere. Like whenever I go shopping for groceries, the most common material I see in all stores is plastic. If likened, nowadays, plastic is the king of the retail world. Some of these plastics are meant for repeated use for a long time. Unfortunately, much of the plastic we use, however, is only used for a concise time. The Plastic itself is one of the biggest causes of environmental damage. Therefore, we should minimize the use of plastic because it destroys the earth's ecosystem. (Data1/Intro/KR/046/2017B)

Data 1 shows how the students open the essay. It starts with the general statement about the use of plastic in everyday life and the characteristic of Plastic, which is lightweight, easy to use, and practical. After the student talks about the positive side of the vinyl, she then refutes it by showing the negative side of it. The claim or the thesis statement is presented in the last sentence of the first paragraph, "Therefore, we should minimize the use of plastic because it destroys the earth's ecosystem." From the claim, readers can predict that the student would describe the reasons in what way plastic destroys the ecosystem.

The result of the present study does not support the finding of the research conducted by Qonitaton (2016), and (Umunnakwe & Pitse, 2017). The students in Qonitaton (2016) and Umunnakwe & Pitse (2017) were not able to make the thesis statement well, while this case does not happen in the present study. In conclusion, the students in this study have a good ability to make an introductory paragraph for their essay responding to an environmental issue.

Body of the essay

Several traits typically characterize good development of the body of the essay. First, Oshima & Hogue (2007) state that the shape of the piece is usually written in one or more paragraphs in which each of the paragraph consists of a topic sentence and several supporting sentences. Second, the supporting sentences in the body present reasons, facts, and explanations (Savage & Mayer, 2006). They are essentials because the reasons help describe the main idea. The data, in this research, shows that each paragraph in the body of the essay contains one topic sentence. The topic sentence mostly appear at the beginning of the section.

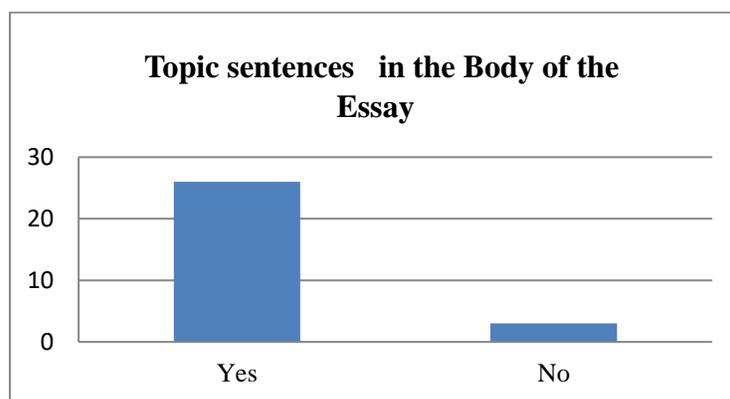


Figure 3. The topic sentence

Figure 3 shows that almost all students' essay has the topic sentence in the body of the paragraphs (90%), and only one student (10%) who was not able to state the topic sentence. In terms of paragraph development, writing experts have proposed several ways to organize the paragraphs, namely by using reasoning, cause-effect relation, comparison and contrast, and chronological order relation (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Savage & Mayer, 2006).

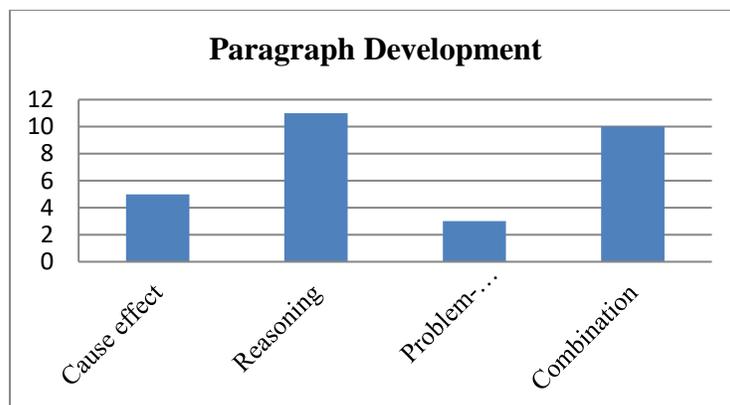


Figure 4. Paragraph Development

Figure 4 shows how the students develop the paragraph in the body of the essay. In the piece, the students expand the item by using cause-effect relationships (17%), reasoning (38%), problem-solution (10%), and the combination between two patterns (35%), either reasoning and problem-solution, or cause-effect and problem-solution pattern. From the data, the students mostly choose the reasoning organization. However, some students prefer to use two-paragraph organizations to develop the body of the essay. The example of the student's work can be seen in the following data excerpt. The example is the continuation of data 1 presented in the introduction section above.

The use of plastics can destroy our earth's ecosystem. The condition of our earth is dirty. Countless amounts of pollutions come by vehicles, factories, and household waste. And as far we know, many sea animals died. Sadly, the cause of the death of sea animals is very pathetic, which is plastic waste poisoning. Much plastic debris found

in the body of sea animals ranging from food plastics, plastic bags, to beverage bottles from plastic has made them suffered. Those animals died because of us. Normally, plastic goods can take up to 1000 years to decompose in land lls, while plastic bags that we use in everyday life take 10-1000 years to decompose, whereas plastic bottles can take 450 years or more (Pribadi, 2019). Plastic that ends up in the ocean will settle and damage the balance of the marine ecosystem. So, before it is too late, prevention can still be done, we must reduce the use of plastics regularly. For example, we are replacing plastic bags with shopping tote bags, carrying a drinking bottle, so we no longer use packaging bottles, and replacing plastic cutlery with materials that are more environmentally friendly. If you are going to the convenience store and you don't have much shopping, there is no need to use a plastic bag. Just put your things in the bag, or have a bag that can accommodate your groceries. .(Data 1/body/KR/046/2017B

The example of the student's writing above describes how she develops the body of the essay. She develops the shape of the piece by elaborating on the topic sentence written at the beginning of the paragraph. She gives reasons and facts in what way plastic destroys the earth's ecosystem, not only damaging Landfields but also the marine ecosystem. Not only giving ideas, but she also provides solutions to minimize the use of plastics. Thus, in terms of the paragraph organization, she combines the reasoning and solution to develop the body of the essay. The composition can still be elaborated by giving more details in terms of how plastics damage marine life, and what happened to land if the substance poisons the soil and the clean water. However, the development of the body of the paragraph is considered adequate for a novice EFL writer where English is not the first language. In terms of the body of the essay, the result of the present study does not support the finding of the previous research. Qonitun's study (2016) reveals that EFL Indonesian students have poor ability to write an essay as they are not able to organize and develop the paragraph well. The finding of this research shows otherwise.

Concluding Paragraph

Writing a concluding paragraph is essential to make the essay intact. The last section shows that the discussion has reached its end. Theoretically, there are several ways of making an introductory paragraph. The concluding part can be in the form of a summary of the main points in the essay, a prediction, a restatement of the writer's opinion, a suggestion or advice, and a hope (Zemach & Islam, 2004; Savage & Mayer, 2006).

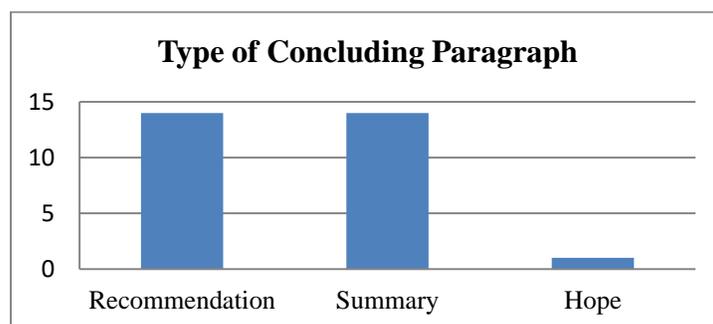


Figure 5. The Concluding Paragraph

Figure 5 shows that the students prefer to use recommendations or advice (48%) and summary (48%) to close their essays. The following is an example of the student's concluding paragraph taken from data 1.

In conclusion, the use of plastic for food packaging is widespread. We, as a young generation, have a significant role and responsibility to protect the environment. Shared awareness is needed to safeguard the future of the earth, and we can start with something simple. Starting from a small thing, it will continue to be big things and produce tangible results for the planet. If we continue not to care about the use of plastics, the damage, and the destruction of the planet is only a matter of time. Maybe in a few decades, the ocean will get dirty, the water quality will get worse, and the animals will slowly die. Then, what about humans? In the end, we will regret not caring about environmental safety. Since we only have one earth, with limited resources and space, let's protect our planet by minimizing the use of plastic. (Data 1/concl/KR/046/2017B)

Advice or recommendation for a concluding paragraph is considered appropriate with the topic. Mostly, the students recommend the audience *first*, not to use the plastic bags when shopping, but to bring their bag from home; *second*, not to throw away the plastic waste into rivers and oceans; *third*, to put items they purchase into their pack if they shop only one or two things; *fourth*, to put snacks and meals in their food containers, and 5) to create profitable products from recycled plastic waste.

In conclusion, we should minimize the use of plastic because plastic's food packaging has a bad effect on our environment, especially for our ocean. If we care about our environment, we can live comfortably, happily, and healthily. Let's save our environment! (Data 1/Concl/LL/023/2017A)

The use of summary for concluding paragraph is appropriate since it restates the writer's opinion. When the topic is discussing the excessive use of plastic, the writer needs to strengthen the position and ask the reader to minimize the use of plastic to save and protect the environment. In term of the concluding paragraph, the result of the present study does not support previous research which found that EFL students in the Indonesian context have problems making concluding paragraph either for paragraph writing (Rahmatunisa, 2014; Yunhadi, 2016), or essay writing (Qonitatu, 2016). In the present study, all of the students can conclude the essay.

Conclusion

With the continuing damage the environment suffers nowadays, it is a time for the language teacher to start to think green. Language teachers should take active participation in conserving nature through the incorporation of environmental issues. The result of the study shows that incorporating environmental topics for teaching writing is highly applicable. The result shows that almost all students can write an acceptable essay with a complete structure, ranging from the introductory paragraph, the body of the piece, and the concluding paragraph.

This research, however, has some weaknesses. Firstly, the present study has no information about the students' difficulties in using the grammar to express the ideas as it focuses only on the content and the organization of the essay. Thus, future researchers can do an error analysis study to find out the students' linguistic problem when they write a composition about an environmental topic. Future researchers can also investigate the language used by the students to describe nature by using eco-critical discourse analysis. Secondly, the result of the present study cannot be used as a generalization because it is descriptive. Thirdly, future researchers can also investigate the level of the students' attitudes toward environmental awareness. Thus, future studies is suggested to compare before and after they write the essay responding to the ecological issue, whether their awareness increases or not. Such information will give valuable insights for teachers to use an ecological topic to help create a better generation for sustainable development.

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