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## Writing Strategies Used by Indonesian EFL Students with Different English Proficiency

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### Abstract

The present study investigates the writing strategies used by 135 Indonesian English Foreign Language undergraduate students with different English proficiency and the relationship between their English proficiency, indicated by students' receptive vocabulary knowledge, and the quality of text they produced. The writing strategies questionnaire by Petrić and Czár (2003) was used to analyze participants' use of strategies in the three stages of writing: pre-writing, drafting, and revising. Each item in the questionnaire was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The Vocabulary Size Test (Nation & Beglar, 2007) was used as an indicator of participants' proficiency in English. The participants were also asked to write an essay in English, which was assessed using the ESL Composition Profile of Jacob et al. (1981). The results of the data analysis showed that most of the students applied 15 of the 38 strategies referred to in the questionnaire. Results also indicate no significant differences in the choice of strategies between students with high versus low English proficiency levels. However, participants' vocabulary size had only a weak positive correlation with their writing quality. The findings aim primarily to inform Writing courses in English Education majors in Indonesia, though they may also be useful for other English learning contexts.

**Keywords:** Writing Strategies, English Proficiency Levels, Writing Quality.

### Introduction

Writing is a challenging task for students whose English is their foreign/second language (EFL/ESL). They need to write coherently to meet the academic standard in a language with which they may be less familiar or proficient (Abas & Aziz, 2016; Rao, 2007). University students majoring in English Education in Indonesia are obliged to write essays, assignments, and theses in English (Abas & Aziz, 2016). Despite learning English for six years in high school and four years in the university, most students' ability to practice English is still

considered low (Abrar et al., 2018). This is because most only have a chance to practice the language during their English classes, and few students see the immediate need to use it outside of the classroom (Akbari, 2015).

Furthermore, in practicing writing in English, many students do not possess the skills necessary to build effective communication using a written medium (Defazio, Jones, Tennant & Hook, 2010). Students' common challenges are a lack of information regarding the topic or the target reader and weak knowledge of the language grammatical rules (Hyland, 2001). Producing a writing piece also requires students' ability to apply different linguistic and cognitive skills in which EFL/ESL students may not be well-practiced (Defazio et al., 2010; Rao, 2007).

Previous studies show that teaching writing strategies explicitly improve ESL students' writing quality (Mastan, Maarof & Embi, 2017). Silva and Graham (2015) studied the impact of strategy instruction on strategy use by dividing the students into experimental and control groups in English for Academic Purposes classes. The results indicated that the experimental group's intervention helped them choose the strategies that help them enhance their work quality. A study by Maarof and Murat (2013) with upper secondary school students in Malaysia found that higher and lower proficiency students applied strategies in approximately similar frequency; however, higher proficiency students used different types of strategies to those of lower proficiency. Similar results were identified by Arifin (2017) research with first-semester graduate EFL students who were also English teachers in Indonesia. In contrast, Rahmawati, Fauziati, and Marmanto (2019) found that higher and lower achiever students employed all the writing strategies highlighted in the research. However, the higher achievers were found to use the strategies to a higher frequency than their low achiever peers.

Hence, past studies suggest that writing strategies may help support writing quality and may be determined by students' receptive vocabulary knowledge as one of the best predictors to evaluate students' language proficiency. However, there are some inconsistencies in the findings that suggest further research is warranted. This study aimed to answer the following three research questions: 1. What are the writing strategies used by Indonesian EFL university students? 2. Are there differences in the most frequently used strategies between higher level and lower level proficiency Indonesian EFL university students? 3. Are there any relationships between mastery in vocabulary and the quality of students' writing? This study's results should contribute to the knowledge of the strategies applied by EFL students in accomplishing their writing tasks and determine whether students need to be encouraged to use a variety of strategies in writing more frequently to improve their writing performance.

## **Literature Review**

### **Writing Strategies and English Proficiency in L2 Writing**

Flower and Hayes (1981) examined the writing process and concluded that writing involved mental processes in the three phases: planning, translating, and reviewing. Planning involves generating ideas, organizing the ideas and set the writing goals. Translating ideas occurs by using long-term memory, knowledge of discourse and topic to support the writing process. Reviewing is where the writer checks the whole work, which involves reading and editing the work, to ensure that the text produced meets the requirements being set.

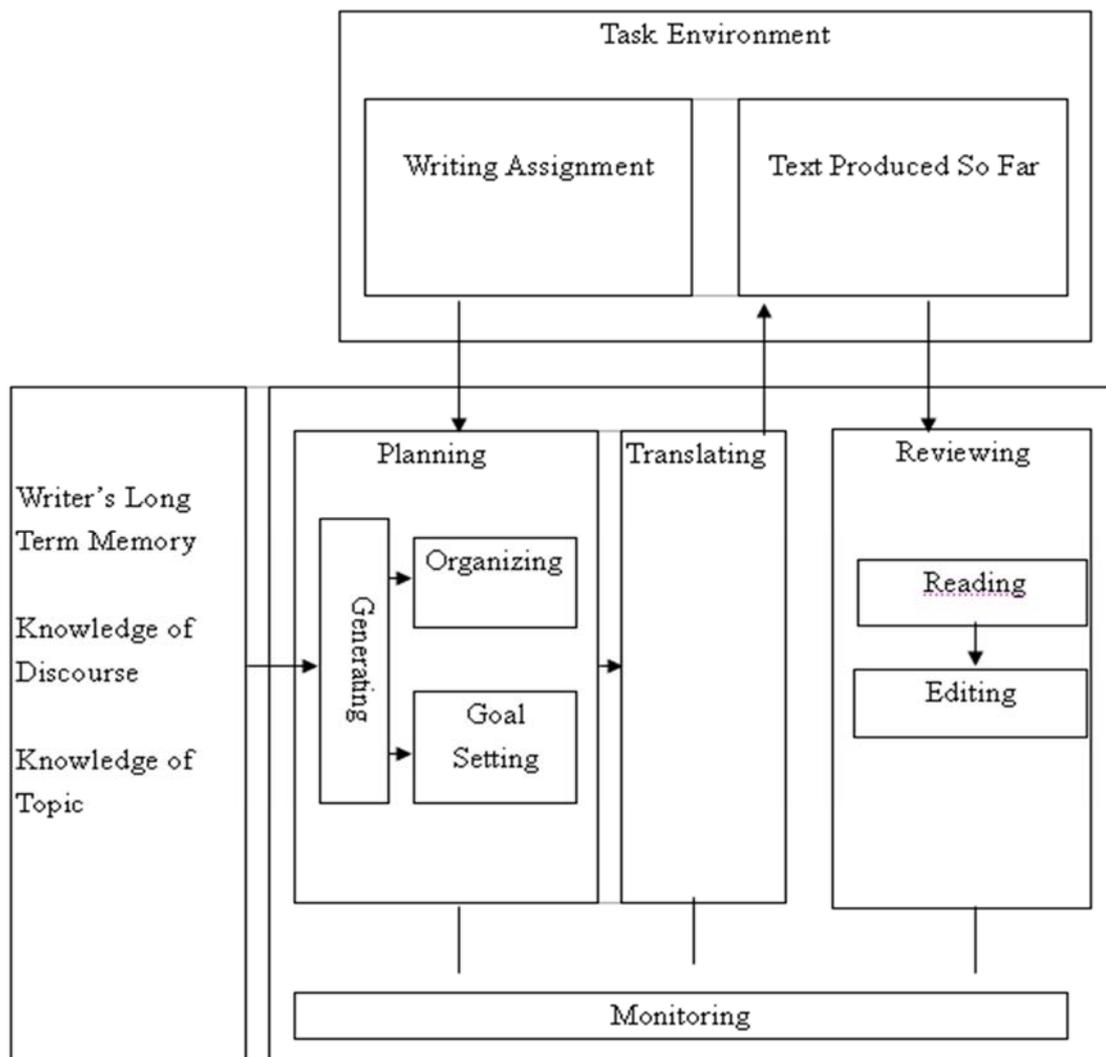


Figure 1. Flower-Hayes (1981) writing model

Since writing has been regarded as a difficult cognitive activity, strategies are often necessary to support the performance of the task in both a first (L1) and a second language (L2) (Nunan, 1989; Richards, 1990). Writing strategies are considered to be performed consciously by an individual writer to solve problems or achieve goals during the writing process. Petrić and Czár (2003) have validated a writing strategies questionnaire based on the Flower and Hayes' model. Such writing strategies should play an important role in helping L2 learners with different proficiencies develop their writing skills (Raofi, Chan, Mukundan & Rashid, 2014).

A longitudinal intervention study conducted by Silva (2015) investigated the impact of teaching writing strategies to a group of undergraduate students in Sri Lanka. The results showed significant improvements in writing strategy use and writing performance after strategy instruction. Another study on applying writing strategy instruction to improve students' writing competence was conducted by Bai (2015) with a primary school in Singapore. The findings revealed that the intervention increased the students' writing

competence and strategy use. These studies suggested that EFL/ESL students need to be trained to use strategies during the writing process to improve their writing quality.

A survey was conducted by Peñuelas (2012) to 231 American university students from different majors to investigate the writing strategies used by the students in composing their writing tasks. The survey included six subgroups of writing strategies; memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The results show that high proficient students, indicated by their A or B grades in their English class, used cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies more than affective, memory and social strategies. These students also used the strategies significantly more frequently than their low proficient peers.

Abdul-Rahman (2011) investigated the differences in writing strategies applied between native speakers of English (NSE) and non-native speakers of English (NNSE). She found three strategies applied differently across the two groups: an organization strategy at the planning stage, a content strategy, and a mechanics strategy at the revising and editing stage. NSE was found to pay more attention to the writing process than the NNSE on the writing product. This was evidenced by using organisation strategies more frequently in NSE's planning stage than the NNSE students. No significant differences were found between NSE and NNSE in using writing strategies during the writing process. At the stage of revising, NSE indicated more strategies related to revising content and mechanics than the NNSE. The two groups of students were also found to approach the strategies differently. For example, the outlining strategies for NSE students generate ideas, while for NNSE students, this means framing their ideas.

More on writing strategies used by EFL/ESL students, Raoofi et al. (2014) found that more successful university students in Malaysia revealed to employ more metacognitive strategies than less successful students. Again in Malaysia, Abdullah et al. (2011) revealed that good ESL students use the same strategies as weaker ones. The difference between the two groups was that the good ESL students used the strategies more often than the weaker ones. Mutar and Nimehchisalem (2017) studied the writing strategies used by 132 Iraqi high school students. The findings revealed that the students used the strategies in a low frequency, and there was no significant difference between high and low proficiency students in the use of the strategies. The only difference found was that female students use strategies more frequently than male students.

In the Indonesian context, Abas and Aziz (2018) explored the writing strategies used by Indonesian EFL graduate students. However, they limited their sample only to proficient student writers. The findings showed that student writers applied a five-step writing process and used ten writing strategies. Still in Indonesia, Budiharso (2014) found that high achievers EFL undergraduate students put more effort into every writing stage than their low achiever peers. A similar result was revealed by Mistar, Zuhairi and Parlindungan (2014). High school students in Indonesia were found to use writing strategies at a moderate level, and the more successful students used the strategies more frequently than their less successful peers.

Recently, Ardila (2020) investigated the writing strategies applied by EFL university students in Indonesia across different proficiency and gender. The findings showed no differences between gender in the strategies used among higher proficient students, while less proficient students only different in affective strategies. This study also found that female

students used the strategies in all six categories more effectively than male students. The previous studies' results indicate that more studies on investigating the writing strategies used by the students with different proficiencies will benefit the English writing teaching practice, especially for EFL/ESL students.

### **Vocabulary as a Predictor for Writing Quality**

Quality writing requires sufficient vocabulary. Second language (L2) vocabulary is claimed as one of the best predictors in evaluating students' L2 proficiency and writing quality. Llach and Gallego's (2009) studied the receptive vocabulary size and its correlation to the quality of Spanish learners' writings and their reading comprehension. The participants in their study were 6th graders and treated English as their foreign language (EFL). Therefore, the measure used in this study were the 1000 Word Test and the 2000 frequency-band of the VLT. The results showed that the learners' receptive vocabulary size does not indicate a very high correlation, yet significant to their essay quality and a significant positive correlation towards reading comprehension.

A study conducted by Stæhr (2008) with 88 EFL learners from lower secondary in Denmark identified vocabulary size's influence on the students' listening, reading, and writing abilities. The study results indicated that receptive vocabulary size, assessed using Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001), greatly impacted the participants' reading and writing abilities, but a lesser influence on their listening ability. This was assumed because most of the participants in their ninth grade of lower secondary did not master the most frequent 2000 words in English.

Moving to the university level, Šišková (2016) conducted a study towards Slavic EFL learners in the Czech Republic. Students' vocabulary size was assessed by having the 14,000 version of VLT. Students' receptive vocabulary was correlated to their productive vocabulary by analysing lexical diversity, lexical sophistication and lexical density in students' writing. The findings showed that students' receptive vocabulary correlated moderately to the lexical diversity, but the weak correlation to lexical sophistication and no correlation with lexical density in the composition they produced.

In Turkey, Kiliç (2019) measured three areas of EFL Turkish learners' vocabulary variables; productive vocabulary size, receptive vocabulary size, and depth of vocabulary knowledge and their correlations to students' writing and speaking as productive language skills. Applying multiple regression analysis, it was found that the three vocabulary variables provide 26% of variance to students' writing performance and 17% to their speaking performance.

The importance of picking up correct vocabulary in a particular writing task was admitted by the students with English as their additional language at a New Zealand university. They also claimed that they are aware of the importance of knowing their audience, such as academic members, in writing their work. They selectively choose academic and technical words to fit their essays to have professional impressions (Coxhead, 2012). This current study used the Vocabulary Size Test (VST) to determine if receptive vocabulary knowledge is a good predictor of students' writing quality, as evidenced in the previous studies.

## Research Design

The data were collected from 135 undergraduate students majoring in English Education from two universities located in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. All participants have already passed writing subjects offered by their university in the third to fifth semester. These subjects comprised Paragraph Writing, Essay Writing, and Academic Writing.

The data were obtained by giving the students a vocabulary measure, writing tasks, and asking them to complete a writing strategies questionnaire. The Vocabulary Size Test used in this study was taken from 14,000-word families to estimate vocabulary size. The test contains 140 multiple-choice items, with ten items from each 1000 word family level. Nation and Beglar (2007), in their initial studies, revealed that undergraduate non-native speakers of English vocabulary size were around 5,000-6,000 word families. Therefore, only half of the questions (70 questions) were used in this study. Participants were given 20 minutes to complete the 70 items. Each item consisted of a short sentence with a word in bold (the keyword): for example, ‘MUMBLE: He started to mumble.’ This was followed by four options: (a) think deeply; (b) shake uncontrollably; (c) stay further behind the others; (d) speak in an unclear way. The participant was required to indicate the option that has the closest meaning to the keyword. Each correct answer will be scored 1, with the total possible being 70. The difficulty level increased from low to high-frequency words as the students moved from one question to another.

The topic for the English writing task was, “*It is important for children to learn the difference between right and wrong at an early age. Punishment is necessary to help them learn this distinction. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion? What sort of punishment should parents and teachers be allowed to use to teach good behaviour to children?*” Students were given 40 minutes to produce the essay. The essay’s assessment was based on the ESL Composition Profile by Jacobs et al. (1981), which assesses five elements in the essays: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

Finally, the participants were asked to fill in the writing strategies questionnaire. The questionnaire was adopted from Petrić and Czár (2003), based on Flower and Hayes’ theory (1981) on writing’s cognitive process. The questionnaire comprised two parts. The first part measured the research participants’ characteristics and included additional items added by the researcher. These questions aimed to elicit information on participants’ semester of study, their gender, the years spent learning English, any English course taken before entering university, any writing subjects have already taken during studying in the university, types of text they generally write in English, and whether they like to write in English or not. The second part of the questionnaire referred to the strategies that might be used by the students in composing an essay. This part was divided into three sections: pre-writing (8 items), drafting (14 items), and revising (16 items). Participants were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert scale indicating 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). The time to fill in the questionnaire was limited to 15 minutes, though this was enough time for all participants to complete all the items.

## Results

### Participants' Writing Strategies Questionnaire Data

The writing strategies questionnaire reported in this study were participants' perceptions of the strategies they used for any English writing tasks they performed as a student, not just the writing they did for this research purposes. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations (SD) for three stages of the strategies. Oxford's (1990) classified students' mean score into three categories: mean 3.5 and above is categorized as a high strategy user, between 2.5 and 3.4 is a medium strategy user, and below 2.4 is a low strategy user. Participants' overall mean of the writing strategies in this study was 3.34, with an SD of 0.438. This suggests that the participants used writing strategies at a Moderate Level. The findings in Table 1 also suggest that participants used strategies in the drafting stage (M=3.67; SD=.415) more than the strategies in the pre-writing stage (M=3.32; SD=.439) and revising stage (M=3.03; SD=.459).

Table 1.

#### *Summary of Writing Strategy Use in Each Stage*

| Stage           | Mean | SD   | Level    |
|-----------------|------|------|----------|
| Prewriting      | 3.32 | .439 | Moderate |
| Drafting        | 3.67 | .415 | High     |
| Revising        | 3.03 | .459 | Moderate |
| Overall writing | 3.34 | .438 | Moderate |

Table 2 shows the strategies frequently used by the participants in each stage of writing an English essay – frequently here refers to a frequency response score of 3.5 or above on an item. It also provides information on the number of participants (with percentages) selecting each response option, together with mean and standard deviation (SD) values indicative of the frequency of use of each strategy in the different stages of writing an English essay.

In the pre-writing stage, only three strategies were frequently applied by the participants. As many as 48 participants (35.6%) claimed they *always* aimed to *make themselves aware of the requirements*. This result suggests that participants considered awareness of the essay's requirements as important: this might include understanding the topic and the word limit. Another strategy frequently used by the participants was *to look at a sample writing* with 49 participants (36.3%) claimed they *always* use this strategy. This means that having a writing model helped the participants to understand what they were going to write. Strategy no. 6, *to note down words and short notes related to the topic*, only has 36 participants (26.7%) who said they *always* applied the strategy. However, as many as 52 participants (38.5%) claimed they would *usually* use the strategy. This strategy would be likely to help participants to stay on track and only write things related to the topic given.

In the drafting stage, eight out of 14 strategies were frequently applied by the participants. In strategy no. 1, 59 participants (43.7%) claimed to *always start their writing with an introduction*. This indicates that they were aware that the readers need to be informed of the topic in the introductory paragraph. In terms of fluency, most of them preferred to *stop after writing a sentence or a paragraph to reread what they have written to get ideas on how to continue*. These indicate that the participants need to make sure that they write their essays coherently. When participants found difficulties to continue writing, 28 of them (20.7%)

would *always simplify a sentence to express their ideas*, and another 65 of them (48.1%) would *usually* do this. They would also try to *write in native language before translating to English word or find a synonym*. Another strategy is to seek help from a dictionary, and they preferred to use a bilingual dictionary than a monolingual dictionary. Using a bilingual dictionary has been claimed by Richards and Renandya (2002) to help learners with the definitions and examples they need in the target language to complete a written text.

In the revising stage, participants only favoured three strategies. As many as 60 participants (44.4%) said they *usually* try to *check if my essay matches the requirements*, and another 46 (34.1%) said they *always* use this strategy. This agrees with participants' choice of strategy no. 2 in the pre-writing stage, where they would make themselves aware of the requirements before starting to write. For strategy no. 13, to *show my text to somebody and ask for his/her opinion*, only 28 participants said they *always* apply the strategy. However, another 42 of them said they would *usually* use this strategy. The last strategy favoured by the participants was to *check my mistakes after I get back the paper with feedback from the teacher*: 55 participants would *always* apply this strategy. These two last strategies implied that participants appreciated feedback, especially from their teachers, to improve their work.

To summarize, of the 38 strategies listed in the writing strategies questionnaire, the participants used only 15 of these strategies with a high-frequency level. According to Hu and Chen (2007), students will increase or decrease their use of strategies depending on the writing requirements. This implies that their choices of writing strategies are affected by task complexity.

Table 2.

*Overall Writing Strategies Most Frequently Used*

| No. | Pre-writing stage   | N (%)   | UT (%)   | ST (%)    | UT (%)    | A (%)     | Mean | SD    | Level |
|-----|---|---------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------|-------|-------|
| 2.  | Made myself aware of the requirements                     | 1 (.7)  | 6 (4.4)  | 36 (26.7) | 44 (32.6) | 48 (35.6) | 3.98 | .934  | High  |
| 3.  | Look at a model by proficient writer                      | 0 (0.0) | 1 (.7)   | 34 (25.2) | 51 (37.8) | 49 (36.3) | 4.10 | .800  | High  |
| 6.  | Note down words, short notes related to the topic         | 2 (1.5) | 8 (5.9)  | 37 (27.4) | 52 (38.5) | 36 (26.7) | 3.83 | .943  | High  |
| No. | Drafting stage  | N (%)   | UT (%)   | ST (%)    | UT (%)    | A (%)     | Mean | SD    | Level |
| 1.  | Start with the introduction                               | 0 (0.0) | 2 (1.5)  | 23 (17.0) | 51 (37.8) | 59 (43.7) | 4.24 | .784  | High  |
| 2.  | Stop after each sentence                                  | 2 (1.5) | 11 (8.1) | 39 (28.9) | 47 (34.8) | 36 (26.7) | 3.77 | .985  | High  |
| 3.  | Stop after a few sentences/a paragraph                    | 0 (0.0) | 7 (5.2)  | 41 (30.4) | 56 (41.5) | 31 (23.0) | 3.82 | .845  | High  |
| 4.  | Reread what I have written                                | 1 (.7)  | 1 (.7)   | 8 (5.9)   | 43 (31.9) | 82 (60.7) | 4.51 | .711  | High  |
| 8.  | Simplify what I want to write                             | 0 (0.0) | 3 (2.2)  | 39 (28.9) | 65 (48.1) | 28 (20.7) | 3.87 | .757  | High  |
| 9.  | Write in native language and later translate into English | 1 (.7)  | 11 (8.1) | 33 (24.4) | 43 (31.9) | 47 (34.8) | 3.92 | .993  | High  |
| 10. | Find a similar English word/synonym                       | 1 (.7)  | 1 (.7)   | 34 (25.2) | 45 (33.3) | 54 (40.0) | 4.11 | .861  | High  |
| 11. | Look for a word in dictionary                             | 5 (3.7) | 11 (8.1) | 44 (32.6) | 38 (28.1) | 37 (27.4) | 3.67 | 1.078 | High  |

|            |  |                  |                   |                   |                   |                  |             |           |              |
|------------|--|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|
| 12.        | Use a bilingual dictionary                     | 4<br>(3.0)       | 4<br>(3.0)        | 28<br>(20.7)      | 42<br>(31.1)      | 57<br>(42.2)     | 4.07        | 1.009     | High         |
| <b>No.</b> | <b>Revising stage</b>                          | <b>N<br/>(%)</b> | <b>UT<br/>(%)</b> | <b>ST<br/>(%)</b> | <b>UT<br/>(%)</b> | <b>A<br/>(%)</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> | <b>Level</b> |
| 11.        | Check if essay meets the requirements          | 0<br>(0.0)       | 1<br>(.7)         | 28<br>(20.7)      | 60<br>(44.4)      | 46<br>(34.1)     | 4.12        | .754      | High         |
| 13.        | Show text to somebody and ask for opinion      | 3<br>(2.2)       | 22<br>(16.3)      | 40<br>(29.6)      | 42<br>(31.1)      | 28<br>(20.7)     | 3.52        | 1.064     | High         |
| 16.        | Check mistakes after feedback from the teacher | 3<br>(2.2)       | 7<br>(5.2)        | 27<br>(20.0)      | 43<br>(31.9)      | 55<br>(40.7)     | 4.04        | 1.010     | High         |

Note: N=never, UN=Usually not true, ST=Somewhat true, UT=Usually true, A=Always

### Participants' English Proficiency and Choice of Writing Strategies

Participants' proficiency in English was determined by their scores in the vocabulary test. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics, which indicated that the vocabulary test scores ranged from 22 to 59 (out of 70) with a mean of 36.35 and a standard deviation of 7.26.

Table 3.

*Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Vocabulary Test and Reading Comprehension Test*

| Measure         | Minimum | Maximum | Total | M     | Median | SD   |
|-----------------|---------|---------|-------|-------|--------|------|
| Vocabulary Test | 22      | 59      | 70    | 36.35 | 36.00  | 7.26 |

The participants were divided based on the median of their vocabulary score: those who scored 1 to 36 were categorized as lower-level English proficiency, and those who scored 37 to 70 were categorized as higher-level English proficiency. Based on this, 74 participants were categorized as lower-level proficiency, and 61 participants as higher-level proficiency. A chi-square analysis was used to find any significant differences between the strategies chosen by those with higher English proficiency compared to those with lower proficiency. Of the 38 strategies detailed in the questionnaire, only three showed a significant difference between the two groups: these three findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.

*The Differences in the Choice of Writing Strategies between Lower and Higher Proficient Participants*

| Questions   | English proficiency | Never true | Usually not true | Somewhat true | Usually true | Always true | Chi-Square |
|---|---------------------|------------|------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| <b>Pre-writing stage</b>                          |                     |            |                  |               |              |             |            |
| Q5  | Low                 | 4 (-1.0)   | 6 (-1.5)         | 32 (.7)       | 17 (.3)      | 15 (.8)     | 9.91 (4)   |
| Have a plan in mind, but not on paper             | High                | 8 (1.1)    | 14 (1.7)         | 20 (-.7)      | 12 (-.3)     | 7 (-.9)     | p=.042     |
| Q6  | Low                 | 2 (.9)     | 2 (-1.1)         | 23 (.6)       | 23 (-1.0)    | 24 (1.0)    | 9.72 (4)   |
| Note down words, short notes related to the topic | High                | 0 (-1.0)   | 6 (1.3)          | 14 (-.7)      | 29 (1.1)     | 12 (-1.1)   | p=.045     |
| <b>Revising stage</b>                             |                     |            |                  |               |              |             |            |
| Q6  | Low                 | 0 (-1.0)   | 10 (.0)          | 27 (-1.2)     | 30 (1.3)     | 7 (.6)      | 10.42 (4)  |
| Make changes in sentence structure                | High                | 2 (1.2)    | 8 (.0)           | 35 (1.3)      | 13 (-1.5)    | 3 (-.7)     | p=.034     |

Note: values in brackets are standardized residuals, which can be used to interpret whether a response frequency is higher or lower than expected

Table 4 suggests that in the pre-writing stage, both strategies (*I think about what I want to write and have a plan in my mind, but not on paper*, and *I note down words and short notes related to the topic*) were used more by the lower-proficiency participants than those with higher vocabulary scores. No significant differences were found in the strategy responses of the higher-proficiency versus lower-proficiency students in the drafting stage. In the revising stage, the strategy *I make changes in sentence structure* was chosen more by the lower-proficiency participants compared to their higher-proficiency peers. Overall, in all three stages, the responses of the two groups' writing strategies were very similar.

### The Correlation between Participants' Vocabulary and Their Writing Quality

The third and last question for this study investigated relationships between mastery in vocabulary and students' writing quality. Participants' essays were assessed by two raters using the ESL profile, which comprised the elements of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (Jacobs et al., 1981). Table 5 presents the lowest and highest score reached by the participants and means, standard deviation, and reliability estimates for each element of their English essay writing.

Table 5.

*Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Estimates for English Essay Writing*

| Measure (total possible) | Minimum | Maximum | M     | SD    | Reliability estimates |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|-------|-------|-----------------------|
| Content (13-30)          | 14      | 29      | 22.21 | 3.26  | .96                   |
| Organization (7-20)      | 8       | 20      | 15.23 | 2.29  | .96                   |
| Vocabulary (7-20)        | 9       | 19      | 14.89 | 2.33  | .96                   |
| Language use (5-25)      | 6       | 24      | 17.33 | 3.38  | .94                   |
| Mechanics (2-5)          | 2       | 5       | 3.65  | .70   | .98                   |
| Total (100)              | 37      | 96      | 73.32 | 10.68 | .94                   |

The range of the scoring for each ESL composition element differs due to the elements in a piece of writing being assigned different levels of importance in effective writing (Jacobs et al., 1981) in the total score of 100. The inter-rater reliability was greater than .90 for all scales, indicating that both raters reached a good level of agreement in scoring the participants' essays. Participants' scores for writing were then correlated with their vocabulary measure (see Table 6).

Table 6.

*Correlations between Vocabulary Score and Writing Score*

| Elements of writing | Vocabulary |
|---------------------|------------|
| Content             | .227**     |
| Organization        | .289**     |
| Vocabulary          | .230**     |
| Language use        | .207*      |
| Mechanics           | .069       |
| Total writing score | .252**     |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As indicated in Table 6, participants' vocabulary size showed a significant, but a weak positive correlation with the different elements of the English essay writing scales, varying from .207 to .289, except for the correlation for mechanics was non-significant and near zero.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the writing strategies used by Indonesian EFL undergraduate students. It also aimed to determine the relationship between participants' English proficiency and their essay writing quality. The results indicated that participants frequently applied only 15 of the 38 writing strategies referred to in the students' questionnaire. These comprised three strategies in the pre-writing stage, nine strategies in the drafting stage, and three strategies in the revising stage. Overall, the participants were categorized as moderate writing strategies users. This result is consistent with previous studies (Alkubaidi, 2014; Chen, 2011; Maarof & Murat, 2013; Mutar & Nimehchisalem, 2017), where the students were found to use more strategies during the drafting stage compared to the other two stages of writing.

The result implies that students usually write an essay as school work in a limited time and not as homework. Therefore, the strategies that they apply frequently were the strategies that do not require a lot of time such as in the pre-writing stage, strategy no. 2, *made myself aware of the requirements, can be done by looking at the direction given on the writing task*. Examples of the requirements are; students' work needs to be in the word limit, and provide reasons for any side of the argument they chose. Strategy no. 3 in this stage, *look at a model by proficient writer*, also used frequently by the students. This strategy can also be done in the classroom by browsing samples of writing from sources on the internet using their mobile phone. The last strategy used at a high level in this stage was strategy no. 6, *note down words and short notes related to the topic*. Students can apply this strategy before starting to write to brainstorm their mind before starting to write their ideas.

The strategies in the drafting stage were mostly used because those strategies were applied during the writing process. However, the strategies frequently used by the participants, such as; *to stop after each sentence or a few sentences and to reread what they have written to get ideas on how to continue*, indicated that they faced difficulties with fluency in writing. Participants showed to make use of cognitive strategy by simplifying or translating their ideas. They also applied the compensation strategy by finding the synonym for the word they needed in a dictionary. Other strategies, such as *making changes in outline and asking somebody to help were not the participants' strategies favoured*. This was probably because applying the strategies will take more time, while the participants usually only given a limited time to finish their work.

In the stage of revising, strategy no. 11, *check if the essay meets the requirements* used frequently, was in agreement with the strategy in the pre-writing stage, and made myself aware of the requirements, which are also used in high frequency. This implies that checking the essay requirements before and after writing their work is considered important. However, this indicates that they were focusing more on the writing's surface than the writing content. Strategy no. 13, *show text to somebody and ask for opinion*, would take time from the person being consulted. This can only be done in the classroom if the peer is consulted to check the writing. Another way, both the writer and his/her peer check each other writings, so both have benefits from one another. This strategy has the lowest mean ( $M=3.52$ ) compared to the other strategies in the level of high frequency. This implies that students expected that they would have a chance to show their work to someone, getting feedback, and revise their work before submitting the writing to the teacher. Strategy no.16, *check mistakes after feedback*

*from the teacher* and a high frequency by the students. This strategy might not be applied by the students to revise their current work, but it helps them learn from their mistakes to avoid making the same mistake.

Furthermore, only three strategies showed significant differences in their use between higher and lower proficiency students; two in the pre-writing stage and one in the revising stage. All three strategies were used more by the lower proficiency students than their higher proficiency peers. No significant differences were found between the two groups for the strategies chosen in the drafting stage.

One of the strategies used frequently in the pre-writing stage is to have a plan in mind, but not on paper, dealing with thinking and having a mental plan. The strategy was ineffective for the students to develop their ideas. This was proved by the high frequencies of strategies no. 2, no. 3 and no. 4 in the drafting stage where the students would frequently stop after each sentence or a few sentences to reread what they have written to get ideas on how to continue their writing. Another strategy in this stage used by the lower proficiency students was *noting down words and short notes related to the topic*. This strategy is ineffective to be applied as Hu and Chen (2007) found in their study towards skilled and unskilled EFL Chinese writers, that the skilled writers made use of the strategy to write a complete sentence than mere words or short notes. This indicates that the higher proficiency students applied more effective planning strategies than their lower proficiency peers. The last strategy in the revising stage, *make changes in sentence structure*, indicates that students pay more attention to the writing's surface than the writing's content. Overall, these results suggest approximately similar frequency use of strategies regardless of proficiency, as determined by receptive vocabulary.

This study also revealed that participants' vocabulary repertoire has a significant but weakly positive correlation with writing quality. It was assumed that participants did not make the most of the vocabulary they have to produce a quality writing and did not allocate enough time to practice writing in English despite having enough vocabulary knowledge. The result supports the previous study by Llach and Gallego (2009) on primary school EFL learners. The correlation between receptive vocabulary size and essay quality is not very high, but significant. Šišková (2016) also found a weak correlation between EFL university students' receptive vocabulary knowledge and the lexical sophistication in their texts in the form of short stories. However, a moderate relationship was found between students' receptive vocabulary knowledge and their lexical diversity.

## **Conclusion**

The findings revealed that participants in this study used writing strategies at a moderate level. Participants with a different proficiency level in English show similar frequency use of the strategies. It is recommended that English teachers teach writing strategies explicitly in their classrooms. This is necessary to help students during the writing process and to improve their writing quality. Teaching writing strategies explicitly has proved helpful for students with different English proficiency to improve their writing quality (Bai, 2015; Mastan et al., 2017; Raoofi et al., 2014; Silva, 2015). The lack of relationship between proficiency as determined by vocabulary was also consistent with the small relationship between vocabulary and writing quality in this study. It may be that vocabulary size is not a consistent determiner

of writing strategy use or writing quality. Such students have a relatively long history of learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, an additional recommendation may be to expose students to appropriate reading material before asking them to write an essay with a similar topic. This way, participants will have ideas on what to write and will help them to develop ideas.

Although this study's results should contribute to the knowledge of EFL students' writing strategies with different English proficiency and the relationship between their proficiency and the quality of text they produced, it also has some limitations. First, the number of participants in the present study is not so big; therefore, this study's findings should not be generalized to a larger scale. The instrument used in this study to investigate writing strategies' choice was limited to the writing strategies questionnaire. Further studies should use various instruments, such as interviews, to conduct a more in-depth investigation to reveal students' reasons for choosing the strategies. Besides, this study only used vocabulary size to indicate students' proficiency in English. Hence, further studies should provide various tests to obtain more comprehensive data regarding students' English proficiency.

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