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## EXPLORING STUDENTS' INTERESTS AND CHALLENGES IN WRITING FICTION IN CREATIVE WRITING CLASS

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Received: 04<sup>th</sup> October 2022; Revised: 28<sup>th</sup> November 2022; Accepted: 27<sup>th</sup> December 2022

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### ABSTRACT

This article explored students' interests and challenges in writing fiction in EFL creative writing classes. The study used a qualitative approach involving 43 college students studying creative writing as the subjects of the study. Research instruments for this study were questionnaires and interviews, the first of which asked students what genres of fiction they were interested in, and the second confirmed their motivations in writing the fiction genre and their challenges in writing fiction. Data from questionnaires were analysed using percentages, while data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings of the study revealed that (1) most students (53.5%) were interested in and preferred writing romance fiction, and (2) most students experienced challenges in writing short stories including difficulties in developing an exciting story, deciding on a plot and elaborate dialogues, and defining the characters in the story.

**Key Words:** fiction; students' interest; challenges

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi minat dan tantangan mahasiswa dalam menulis fiksi di kelas menulis kreatif EFL. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan melibatkan 43 mahasiswa yang mempelajari penulisan kreatif sebagai subjek penelitian. Instrumen penelitian untuk penelitian ini adalah kuesioner dan wawancara, yang pertama menanyakan kepada siswa genre fiksi apa yang mereka minati, dan yang kedua mengkonfirmasi motivasi mereka dalam menulis genre fiksi dan tantangan mereka dalam menulis fiksi. Data hasil kuesioner dianalisis dengan persentase, sedangkan data hasil wawancara dianalisis dengan analisis tematik (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa (1) sebagian besar siswa (53,5%) tertarik dan lebih suka menulis fiksi roman, dan (2) sebagian besar siswa mengalami tantangan dalam menulis cerita pendek termasuk kesulitan dalam mengembangkan cerita yang menarik, menentukan plot dan dialog yang terperinci, dan mendefinisikan karakter dalam cerita.

**Kata Kunci:** cerita fiksi; minat mahasiswa; tantangan

**How to Cite:** Dewi, U., Siregar, F. R. (2022). Exploring Students' Interests and Challenges in Writing Fiction in Creative Writing Class. *IJEE (Indonesian Journal of English Education)*, 9(2), 359-371. doi:10.15408/ijee.v9i2.28372

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is a crucial skill that needs to be encouraged in EFL classes. Writing is expressing an idea in written language and connecting people. In EFL writing class, students should be able to write their ideas in sentences. Writing not only assists students with their social development but also connects them to be in tune with what happens in the world around them. Students must consider the audience and purpose in writing (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Students always learn academic writing to develop their ability to write research papers. Besides that, students also learn creative writing.

Creative writing is a fun field of study in language learning abilities. It stems purely from enthusiasm from within and develops as time evolves into something much more desirable, knowledgeable, and immensely necessary for the learning environment (Harshini, 2020). Nowadays, university students are taught academic writing and creative writing. Creative writing is a new subject in the English Department of the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. By studying creative writing, EFL students can write creatively and produce fun writing products. Creative writing is a course in which the writer is an artist of his/herself and connected; therefore,

their writing is connected to their life (Nugraha, 2021). The topics discussed in creative writing class include writing fiction, writing creative non-fiction, and writing poetry. Creative writing is any form of writing written with the creativity of mind including fiction writing, poetry writing, creative non-fiction writing, and more. The purpose is to express, whether it be thoughts, experiences, or emotions (Olehlova, 2016).

In EFL creative writing class, the students learn to write fiction in English. Fiction is a literary work in which the imagination produces the content, but it is not based on facts (Milhorn, 2006). The students learned to write a short story, which is a brief work of fiction. Short story writing aims at encouraging students to write literary works. Having competence in writing short stories, students can develop their imagination (Masie et al., 2018).

In writing fiction, the students should be able to use English vocabulary and also be able to produce creative stories. That is why writing fiction becomes a challenge for EFL students, and one of the biggest problems in EFL creative writing was a lack of vocabulary and low level of language proficiency. They assumed limited knowledge of grammatical

sentence structure (Alisha et al., 2019). Fiction is a literary work based on imagination, such as a novel, short story, or fairy tale. Rather than simply giving information or inciting the reader to make an action beneficial to the writer, creative writing is written to entertain or educate someone, spread awareness about something, or express one's ideas and opinions (Olehlova, 2016). Though fiction is just imagination, it is not easy to write fiction. The elements of fiction are characters, dialogue, setting, plot, and conflict. In creative writing class, the learners wrote fiction based on their imagination. Some factors influence students' ability to write fiction, such as interests, motivation, teaching strategies, and challenges.

In this study, the student's interests and challenges in writing fiction are to be examined. The two factors were described from two points of view: positive and negative. Students' interests as a positive factor increase students' ability to write fiction. Interest is a propensity to pay attention and remember some activity. Learners who have interests pay attention and interest to something and get satisfaction from that. The learners' interest will rise if students get a stimulus from the outside and feel pleasure through something (Ainia, 2020).

This study examined whether the students have the savours to write fiction. This study investigated the genres they are interested in, such as romance, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, mystery, and thriller. In learning creative writing, the students are independent in choosing their genre based on their interests. If the students are interested in a topic, they can write the story creatively. The students wrote and created ideas in their writing. Previous studies have discussed the students' interests and writing abilities. The students have high interest and will have good motivation and valuable abilities. Interest plays a massive role in motivation and confidence; teachers and classroom practices can influence students' interest in writing (Lipstein & Renninger, 2007). High-interest influences students' activity (Tri, 2014). In addition, Slameto (cited in Tri, 2014) stated that indicators of students' interest include attention, willingness, needs, happiness, good attitude, and participation. If the students are interested in the subject, they pay attention. At the same time, as the teacher explains the material, the students do the task, learn the materials, enjoy doing the assignments, have the proper motivation, and deliver an appropriate response to the teacher. In addition, interest helps overcome

unusual or early arrival or frequent repetition of plateaus in learning. Students interested in writing are also more likely to develop a sophisticated understanding of writing and its possibilities (Lipstein & Renninger, 2007).

While challenges as negative factors retard the students' competence in writing fiction. The challenges tend to cause difficulties experienced by the students in writing fiction. Writing has become difficult because of the challenges students face in learning writing skills. This study investigated students' challenges in writing fiction and whether the students had difficulties in writing fiction. Other researchers found some challenges ESL students face, such as a lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, poor spelling, readiness, and lack of exposure to books and reading materials (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). In addition, some challenges or problems for students in writing are the lack of vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, motivation, and the learning environment (Ali & Ramana, 2018). Based on previous research, students' interest in writing tends to have a positive effect on their ability to write; on the other hand, students' challenges in writing fiction tend to have negative impacts on their achievement in writing.

The previous research, however, only discussed students' interests and difficulties in academic writing, not about students' interests and challenges in creative writing especially fiction writing. This study, on the other hand, is concerned with writing fiction, and it aims to investigate the students' interests and challenges in fiction writing. Results of this study will benefit students in improving their ability to write fiction and solve creative writing difficulties.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study applied a qualitative approach to explore the EFL students' interests and challenges in writing fiction. Qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2007). This study investigated the students' interest in writing fiction and the challenges students face in writing fiction in EFL writing classes.

### Participants

The participants of this study were 43 students of the English Department of the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. The researcher chose the participants by using purposive

sampling. The participants of this study were the students who studied creative writing subject in which they wrote fiction as one of their assignments.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The questionnaires and interviews were used to investigate the students' interests and challenges in writing fiction. In this study, 43 students were given questionnaires to investigate the students' interests in writing fiction, and only ten students were given a semi-structured interview to explore the reasons for the student's interest and the students' challenges in writing fiction. The researchers chose ten students who had difficulties writing fiction.

The students participated in EFL creative writing class and had experience writing fiction; therefore, they can share their perceptions about their interests and challenges in writing fiction. The questionnaires were calculated and presented in percentages. The questionnaires represented the students' interests and their challenges in writing fiction. The questionnaires were also analysed in each item to conclude students' interest and challenge in writing fiction. The transcriptions of interviews were analysed using steps for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step requires the researchers to

fully engage in the data by transcribing the interviews, reading the transcripts, and listening to the recordings. Next, the researchers started to interpret the collated codes. The data were sorted according to overarching themes. The researchers should be focused on the relationship between codes, subthemes, and themes. The next step is to refine and define the themes and potential subthemes within the data. Finally, researchers must translate their analysis into interpretable parts as the research findings.

To make the trustworthiness of this study, a member check was used. The researcher shared the analyses of interview transcripts with the participants and confirmed or disconfirmed any claims.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section was divided into two sections: the findings from the data of questionnaires and interviews and the discussion of the results of this study.

#### **Findings**

The first part of the findings presented the result of questionnaires that dealt with the students' interests in writing fiction. Before investigating the students' interest in writing fiction, the researcher explored whether EFL students were fond of reading fiction.

The question asked about the factors of students' interest in writing fiction. The results represented that 95.34% of students read fiction, and only 4.65% did not like to read fiction stories. Based on figure 1, most EFL students were interested in reading fiction stories.

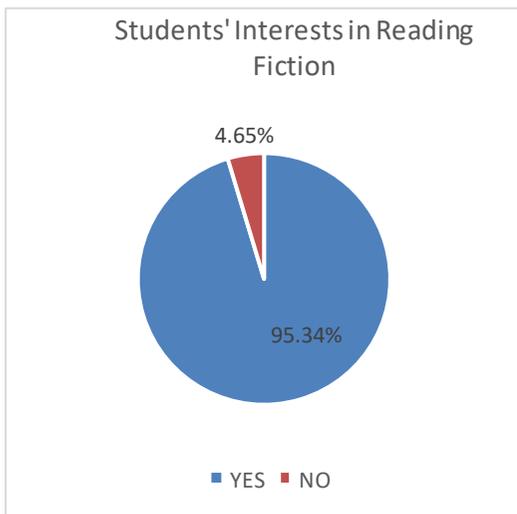


Figure 1. The percentages of students' interest in reading fiction.

The next question asked whether students like to write fiction or not. The questionnaires investigated the students' willingness and feelings to write fiction. This question examined the students' interest in writing fiction. The results of the student's answers are represented in figure 2. Figure 2 shows that 74.41% of students liked to write fiction, and 25.58% of students did not like to write fiction. Figure 2 represented that most EFL students are interested in writing fiction.

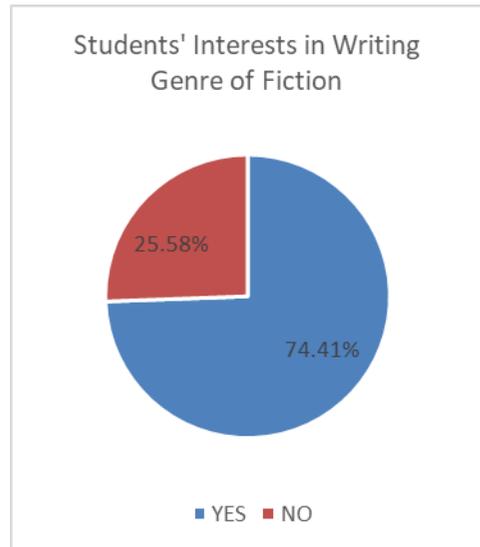


Figure 2. The percentages of students' interest in writing fiction

Based on figure 1 and figure 2, most students who are interested in reading fiction also are interested in writing fiction. However, some students are interested in reading fiction but not writing fiction. The percentage of students' interest in reading fiction (95.34%) was higher than that of students' interest in writing fiction (74.41%). It meant that students were more interested in reading fiction rather than writing fiction.

Furthermore, the next question examined what genre of fiction students liked to write. The results showed that four genres of fiction interested the students. The following figure describes the types of fiction students wrote and the percentages in each category.

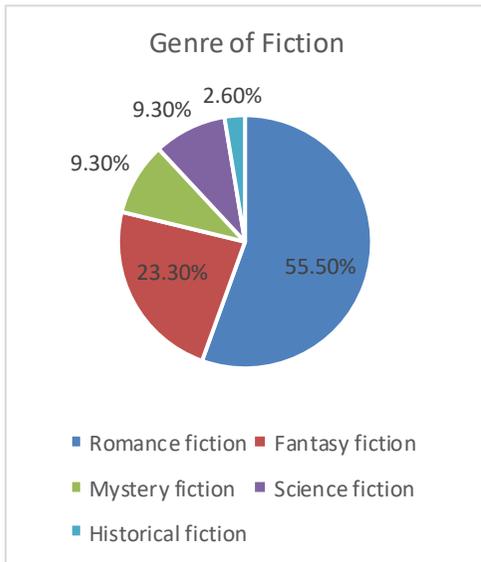


Figure 3. The percentages of students' interest in writing genre of fiction

The results in figure 3 represented that 55.5% of the students like to write romance. From the percentages, it presented that most of the students liked to write romance. To find out the students' reasons, the researcher interviews some students based on their chosen genre. The transcription showed the interview with student 1 and student 2.

S1: Because the romance genre is **the most popular**. In my opinion, this genre is also **the easiest to write** because **the ideas can come from events around us which recreated**.

S2: When I write romance fiction, my **feeling is so happy**, and I do not know the main reason, but the

point is I like to write romance fiction rather than another. Maybe when we write fiction, we can **feel it by ourselves** and touch it.

Most students who adored writing romance said they felt happy when they wrote romance fiction. They stated that it is the easiest to write because the topic deals with real life, and they just recreated the story. In addition, one of the students was interested in writing romance fiction because romance is the most popular genre.

Secondly, figure 3 shows that 23.3% of the students were interested in fantasy writing. Some reasonable statements were given by students when they decided to write fantasy fiction.

S3: Because fantasy stories, in my opinion, are **more interesting to write**.

S4: Because it is something that I like, using **my big fantasy mind** and writing it on paper.

Students 3 and 4 stated they decided to write fantasy fiction because fantasy stories are fascinating. The students also can use their imagination and fantasy in writing the story.

Eventually, the students were interested in writing mystery fiction and science fiction. 9.3 % of the students were interested in mysteries,

and 9.3% also liked to write science fiction. Some students stated the reason they wrote mystery and science fiction.

S5: Because mystery fiction seems **very interesting to write** and **makes the readers curious** about the mystery presented.

S6: I **have a unique sensation** when writing a mystery story because the readers can feel scared.

The students had a curious and unique feeling when they wrote mystery fiction, so they felt interested in writing it. Other students said they had challenges writing science fiction and making the story more reasonable to read.

The students had different reasons for choosing their genre of fiction. Though they found some difficulties, they were interested in writing the genre of fiction.

S7: it is very challenging to write about science fiction because you have to do research beforehand since it is related to science, and you want **to make your story sounds reasonable**.

Students said they had challenges writing science fiction and making the story more reasonable to read.

Lastly, 2.6% of the students were interested in historical fiction, and no one liked to write a thriller. Student 8,

who adored historical fiction, said, "I choose to write historical fiction because it **has a clear sequence**. Historical fiction is also important for people so they can know about history through the story".

The students wrote historical fiction because historical fiction has clear sequences.

In conclusion, based on the explanation above, most students were interested in romance, then followed by writing fantasy, mystery, science, and historical fiction. The students considered many reasons for choosing the fiction genre they wanted to write. They felt happy, interested, unique sensations, and curious when they wrote the fiction.

The second finding was about students' challenges. Some challenges were found by students when they wrote fiction. In investigating the challenges faced by students, the researcher gave the questionnaires and interviewed the students.

The first statement in the questionnaire asked the students whether it was easy to write fiction. The result showed that most students did not think writing fiction was easy. The result represented that 15 (34%) of students strongly disagreed, and 8 (19%) disagreed with the statement. The

second statement in the questionnaire asked the students whether students found challenges in writing fiction. Most of the students decided that they had difficulties writing fiction. It was shown from the results that 9 (21%) students agree, and 10 (23%) students strongly agree. The following are the data from the questionnaires.

Table 1. Students' challenges

No	Questionnaires	S	D	N	A	SA
1	It is easy to write fiction.	15	8	8	5	7
2	I found challenges in writing fiction	9	8	7	9	10

In conclusion, table 1 represented that most of the EFL students stated that they faced challenges in writing fiction in English, and most did not agree that writing fiction was easy.

Interviews investigated the challenges students faced in writing English fiction. The researcher only chose randomly ten students who faced difficulties in writing fiction. The following table presents the results of the interviews about challenges in writing fiction. By answering the interviews, the students expressed their problems in writing fiction as their challenges. The data on students' challenges in writing fiction is displayed in the following table 2.

Table 2. The students' challenges in writing fiction

No	Themes Categories
1	<p>Difficult to find the topic and develop the idea.</p> <p>Theme analysis of students' interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The challenge is when my imagination is stuck out of ideas.</li> <li>• The challenge is that I am in the middle of the story, confused about the plot. Moreover, sometimes I am stuck in the middle of the story, confused about what to continue.</li> <li>• Select the topic.</li> <li>• the challenge is when I want to choose the topic.</li> <li>• If the story is written in English, my challenge in writing fiction is to choose my words and arrange sentences that convey the story's meaning well. However, if it is written in Indonesian, my challenge is to condense the story so that the plot is not too long.</li> <li>• About a week ago, sometimes I get stuck with the story I wrote.</li> <li>• The challenges sometimes I run out of ideas, and I get stuck; when I am in it, I cannot keep writing at that time</li> </ul>
2	<p>Difficult to make an exciting story.</p> <p>Theme analysis of students' interviews."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the story look interesting.</li> <li>• How to deliver the word</li> </ul>

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- 3      beautifully to make the readers get the feeling
- 3      Difficult to set the plot and the dialogue.  
Theme analysis of students' interviews:
- Challenges to developing the plot and making dialogue.
  - Write the storyline to reach a good final ending.
  - The challenge is that it is hard to start a story or make the story end.
  - And challenges to create an ever-evolving storyline.
  - Difficult to think about the plot because written fiction has to imagine so that the story reaches the reader.
- 4      Difficult to decide the characters in the story.
- Two weeks ago, the challenge was to create characters.
  - Confused about choosing the character.
  - The challenge that I face is making the characterisation of the fiction.
  - Difficult to decide on characters.
- 

Based on table 2, the results of students' difficulties in writing fiction were classified into four themes; they were:

1. Difficult to find the topic and develop an idea.

Deciding on the theme and topic is the most important to be agreed upon before we write the story. From the

interview result, the students have difficulty deciding the short story's theme and topic. One of the students said, "the challenge is when I want to choose the topic".

2. Difficult to make an exciting story.

Every writer should be able to make their story interesting to be readable. It is not easy to make the story more interesting. The writer should have creativity and good imagination in writing the story. In this study, the students got difficulty developing an exciting account. One of the students said, "Making the story look interesting is challenging". It meant those students lacked creativity and faced difficulties writing an exciting story.

3. Difficult to set the plot and dialogues.

A plot is a sequence of events in a story. Some students got difficulties in setting their stories and making dialogues. The students faced challenges in establishing the field and making dialogues between characters in the story because they needed the imagination to make the plot and the dialogues. Students said, "challenges to Developing the plot and making a dialogue is challenging".

4. Difficult to decide on the characters in the story.

The story requires the central character, motivated to take action or react to an outside force to achieve some purpose. In writing a short story, the writer should be able to decide the characterisation of his/her account. In this study, some students got difficulty deciding the characters in the story. Deciding on the characters of the story was essential thing before the writer developed the plot in the story. Strong characters were considered, such as the protagonists and the antagonist. In this study, some students have problems setting the character because they have weak imaginations in creating the story. One of the students said, "The challenge that I face is making the characterisation of the fiction".

In conclusion, in this study, the students were interested in writing some fiction genres but faced some challenges when writing fiction. Romance fiction was the most favourite genre that the students wrote. The students struggled to decide on topics, plots, and characters and make dialogue and fun stories.

## Discussion

The students decided to write some genres of fiction, such as romance fiction (53.5%), fantasy (23.3%), science

fiction (9.3%), and mystery (9.3%). Other research also found that some of the students were actively writing fiction. They were all involved as characters who wrote about their fictional lives using shifting points of view (Ryan Rish, 2011). Romance fiction is the most popular, and the story deals with real life. Students tended to explore personal topics that involved their inner emotions (Pitaloka, 2019). The research also found that students enrolled in John's Swords and Spaceships class were interested in fantasy and science fiction (Ryan Rish, 2011). The result also showed minimal genre chosen by students, representing that only 2.6 % of students were interested in writing historical fiction though she found a challenge in making the story sequence. Historical fiction is a literary genre in which the story takes place in the past. Historical fiction captures the details of the period as accurately as possible, such as social norms, manners, customs, and traditions, to enhance believability. Many novels in this genre tell fictional stories involving real historical characters and events (Parimala & Rajendra Karmarkar, 2022)

Most of the students faced challenges in writing a short story. The study's findings presented that students faced four challenges in writing short fiction. Firstly, students were difficult to

find the topic and develop an idea. The previous research stated that the students had difficulty deciding the theme and developing the story. The student's ability to organise the idea was weak because they could not manage the ideas well (Aulia, 2019; Usuar & Andriani, 2019). Another researcher also found that 55% of the students find their writing problems because they do not have enough ideas for the task (Thi & Anh, n.d.). Furthermore, the lack of vocabulary has caused the students to face challenges writing their ideas (Moses & Mohamad, 2019).

Secondly, students were experiencing difficulty in developing an exciting story. The other researcher found that in the process of creating the theme, 69% of the students experienced similar problems in the creation of the plot, whether or not the main idea of the story is unique or similar to the other stories (Pratiwi, 2019).

Thirdly, students found challenges in setting the plot and making dialogues. Lastly, EFL students faced challenges in deciding the characters in the story. On the other hand, there are 11 issues in total, namely plot, characterisations, theme, settings, point of view, grammar, sentence structure, word choice, distractions, writer's

block, and mood as the challenges in writing a short story (Pratiwi, 2019).

Many researchers found that students have problems developing their ideas in writing. Each student may face different challenges in learning writing (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). The language issues in the learners' writing were grammar and syntax, including incorrect use of prepositions, articles, tenses, singular/plural, verbs, sentence structure, and informal expressions (Fareed et al., 2016). This research also found that students got difficulties elaborating the idea in writing fiction.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Fiction is a type of creative writing based on the writer's imagination. The students' interests positively impacted their writing ability; on the other hand, students' challenges involved adverse effects on the students when they wrote fiction. In this study, most of the students were interested in writing romance fiction because romance was familiar to them and they enjoyed when writing that genre. The students also faced four challenges in writing fiction including difficulties in 1) deciding the topic and developing the idea, 2) making an exciting story, 3) creating a good plot with interesting dialogues, and 4) setting robust characters in fiction.

By knowing the students' interests in writing fiction, the lecturers can choose the appropriate genre and enhance the student's ability to write fiction. In addition, by knowing the students' challenges, the lecturers can use strategies or techniques in writing fiction to solve the students' difficulties. Both factors can influence students' ability to write fiction; therefore, the teachers should be able to solve the students' challenges and enhance the student's interest in writing fiction. The correlation between gender and students' interest in writing fiction is another interesting topic that can be investigated further. Related to challenges, researchers can analyse some strategies used in writing fiction.

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