

# Do Topics about Islam Better Facilitate English Writing Skills of Students in Islamic Colleges? Teachers' and Students' Reflections

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## ABSTRACT

Many studies have explored various strategies and approaches to facilitate students' learning to write in English. However, few studies investigated the potential use of localized, familiar, and more personalized topics to develop students' English writing skills. Considering Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis and Piaget's constructivist approach, this study aimed to explore whether topics about Islam can better facilitate students' learning to write in English in Indonesian Islamic colleges. A mixed method design, qualitative method through interviews with seven English writing lecturers from four Islamic colleges in Indonesia, and quantitative method using a student survey, which was responded to by 100 students, became the source of data. The findings informed that a process-oriented approach, positive feedback, and freedom of and familiarity with topics were the main contributing factors to students' English writing development. The salient findings suggested that careful consideration of topic selection and vocabulary familiarity should be made when assigning writing tasks using topics about Islam in Islamic colleges.

## KEYWORDS:

English writing skills;  
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Islamic topics;  
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## Introduction

The issue of students' difficulties in writing in other languages has long taken the interest of researchers and education practitioners, particularly in English as a Foreign Language. The fact that writing is challenging, even in the first language (L1), has been commonly recognized by many. A search using the keywords difficulties in English writing through Google Scholar alone hit as many as 4,570,000 entries, suggesting the rich and exhaustive discussions on the topic. The challenge is even more significant when students need to write in a foreign language, such as English. Studies found that differences in the culture and organization of

writing between L1 and English (Farooq et al., 2012; Fatsah et al., 2021), grammar, and sentence structure (Almahameed & Alajalein, 2021; Farooq et al., 2012; Navaz, 2021) and limited vocabulary (Ghulamuddin et al., 2021) often become the contributing factors to the difficulties.

Many studies have attempted to propose various ways to face challenges in English writing, particularly in the Indonesian EFL context. Other research has also experimented with various media (Amatollah et al., 2022; Dwifadrijin & Pamungkas, 2020; Gunantar & Transinata, 2019; Hadi et al., 2021) and strategies (Ahmadi, 2018; Hyland, 2022; Lam et al., 2017; Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2020) for better facilitation of students' English writing skills development. Other studies explored the aspect of feedback in writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Ma, 2020; Ouahidi & Lamkhanter, 2020; Zumbunn et al., 2022). These studies have mainly focused on pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning English writing, such as media, strategies, and feedback. While the studies on pedagogical aspects have been vast, they seem to miss an essential aspect within the learners, that is, the aspect of identity.

The issue of identity in language learning has also sparked the attention of previous researchers (Aktekin & Celebi, 2020; Davila, 2019; Noonan, 2019; Linares, 2019; Yazan, 2019) focused on ELT teachers' identity and found that ELT student teachers' identity is prevalently constructed based mainly on their language ideology, didactic, and pedagogy. Also, in exploring professional identity, Noonan (2019) found that content, facilitation, and community as learning affinity help shape teachers' professional identity. Concluding from a study, Yazan, (2019) suggests that teacher identity should explicitly become the focus in teacher education but acknowledges that there has not yet been any framework on how to integrate identity in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

Studying ESL classrooms of diverse ethnicities, races, and language backgrounds, Davila (2019) found that using humor in the context of students' identities in terms of ethnicity and ratio language brings more meaningful learning for the students. Linares (2019) studied the use of writing aloud and dialog journaling in her English class. The findings show that comprehensible input in context-rich literacy helps facilitate the development of writing skills of immigrant students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The aforementioned studies highlighted the role of identity in the learning of the teacher students and the students learning English as a second foreign language. Hence, studies on the role of identity in facilitating students' learning are deemed necessary. In the Indonesian ELT context, issues of Indonesian identity as a country having moslem as the majority seem to be lacking attention. Meanwhile, in ELT, particularly EFL context, learners' identity also plays an important part in the success of learning (Norton & De Costa, 2018). Students with an orientation toward their multiple identities in terms of their language are found to have self-perceived proficiency when learning English (Sung, 2020). In addition to language identity, cultural identity also influences students' English learning. The use of digital stories in combination with local cultural content is effective in facilitating English learning. The combination effectively increases students' motivation, reduces students' anxiety, and lets students focus on meaning-making, using familiar vocabulary related to their local cultural content (Kristiawana et al., 2022). The findings by Kristian, in corroboration to previous findings by Norton and De Costa (2018) and Sung (2020), highlight identity's important role in English language learning. In the context of Indonesian ELT, Islam as the religion of the majority of the students, may serve as both cultural and religious identity having the potential to be integrated in the teaching of English.

In fact, several studies have touched upon the Islamic context in Indonesian ELT. Some studies have focused on English for Islamic studies classes (Muzammil & Suhono, 2019), the

teaching of English to the Islamic Studies Education Department (Roza et al., 2019; Sagita et al., 2020), and the use of English to modernize *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) (Zarkasyi, 2020). Other studies explored how the lecturers select and use materials to teach English for Islamic studies aiming to integrate Islamic character values (Muzammil, 2019; Syaifulloh, 2014; Abudhahir et al., 2015) and assessments in Islamic colleges (Hidayah, 2017). A few studies investigated the use of context in teaching Islamic studies (Bandu et al., 2021; Mahboob, 2009; Khairiah & Nurzannah, 2020). A few studies on integrating Islamic values in Indonesian ELT still leave a vast area for investigation, particularly whether Islam as part of students' identity in Indonesian EFL contributes to developing students' English writing skills.

The studies mentioned above mainly focus on teaching English in the Islamic Studies Department or the courses of Islamic studies in the English Department. Meanwhile, Islamic values or topics in Islamic colleges can also be integrated into the English department in general English writing classes, not in the English for Islamic Studies courses. This is because Islamic colleges usually have a mission related to instilling Islamic values as their identity, regardless of the courses. From a pedagogical perspective, this mission can be seen as a resource that potentially contributes to the learning of English by the students in Islamic colleges. Taking Krashen's idea on input hypothesis, particularly the 'here and now' aspect (Krashen, 1982), Islam can be seen as the 'here and now' topic, potentially facilitating learning. Also, Indonesian students' familiarity with Islam topics may reduce what Krashen termed as an affective filter.

In addition to Krashen's hypotheses, the use of Islamic topics in students in Indonesian Islamic colleges' learning to write in English can also be analyzed from the constructivist theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The constructivist perspectives of English language learning adopt Piaget's theory that the construction of new knowledge can be based on having new experiences and information that is in congruence with the pre-existing knowledge (Knight, 2022 in Reyes & Vallone, 2008). In this vein, topics about Islam may serve as the existing knowledge and experience that can be used to develop new knowledge and skills, i.e., English writing. Also, language should be regarded as a social practice; hence, culture should become the core of language teaching (Kramersch, 1993). In addition, cultural background knowledge should be considered a vital factor in the development of second or foreign language learning (Tseng, 2002). Hence, students' cultural background, including their religious background in their social practice, may serve as the comprehensible input, and prior knowledge is the basis for their English language learning.

Another aspect to consider in teaching and learning another language is the issue of interculturality. Learning a language is inseparable from learning the culture of the language being learned. However, this may bring challenges and anxiety, and in the Indonesian EFL context, for example, the Western culture may conflict with the culture of the home country. Socio-cultural differences may even interfere with language learning (Canagarajah, 2006, 1999). Hence, integrating local culture should become a pedagogical consideration for the teacher to better facilitate learning. At the macro skills level, familiarity with content and form can make reading and writing relatively easier (Reid, 1993 in Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). In the Indonesian EFL context, Islam, as the religion of the students in Islamic colleges, can serve as a familiar topic to write about, which can potentially help students write in English more easily.

Considering Krashen's comprehensible input, Piaget's constructivist approach to learning and interculturality in language learning along with the vast area for further exploration of the integration of topics about Islam in the learning of English writing in Indonesian Islamic colleges, this article, hence, presents findings from a case study

conducted in four Islamic colleges. The objectives of the study are to explore the teachers' and students' reflections on (1) the common factors facilitating and (2) hindering the development of English writing skills, (3) teachers' and students' perspectives and experiences on the benefit and drawbacks of using Islamic topics to develop students' English writing skills in Islamic colleges. The third objective focuses more on the teachers' and students' evaluation of the integration of topics about Islam in the teaching of English writing, i.e., if the students benefit from such integration. In line with the above objectives of the study, the findings presented in this article follow this organization. First, it presents the findings on the teachers' and students' perspectives and experiences on the factors contributing. Second, it presents findings on the teacher's and students' reflections on factors hindering English writing skills. Third, it presents findings on the potential benefits and drawbacks of using Islamic topics to develop the English writing skills of students in Indonesian Islamic colleges.

## Method

This study aimed to explore whether topics about Islam can better facilitate the development of English writing skills of students in Indonesian Islamic colleges. In particular, the study explored (1) the teachers' and students' perspectives and experiences on the contributing and hindering factors of developing students' English writing skills and (2) the potential benefits and drawbacks of using topics about Islam to develop students' English writing skills. In line with these objectives, a mixed-method design was used. The incorporation of qualitative and quantitative methods, particularly in collecting and analyzing the data, characterized a mixed-method study (Cresswell, 1999). Under a mixed method design, the qualitative method through interviews with seven English writing lecturers (coded as Teacher 1 to Teacher 7) from four Islamic colleges in Indonesia and the quantitative method using a student survey responded by 100 students become the source of data. These respondents are the students and teachers participating in the research. All the teachers are English teachers in four state Islamic colleges in four different cities: Surabaya, Malang, Purwokerto, and Salatiga. These teachers were selected as they taught English writing in Islamic colleges. They taught various types and genres of English writing, mainly academic genres.

Action research also became a minor part of the current study in which two of the seven teachers were asked to teach English writing skills using Islamic topics in their usual English writing class. The other five teachers did not do the action research as they had experience teaching English writing using Islamic topics. The action research fits with the purpose of this study. Action research aims to explain, describe, and interpret a particular social situation or phenomenon through action in the form of intervention to improve a particular situation (Waterman et al., 2001). In the action research, the teachers did not assign particular topics; the students selected their topics as long as they were related to Islam.

Interview guidelines and survey questions were used as the instruments for data collection. The researchers developed the instruments in the form of interview guidelines and survey questions. The interview guideline consisted of semi-structured questions. Each survey question had a statement with options from strongly agree to strongly disagree or a question with possible responses to the question that the students could select from. Some other survey questions were open-ended and requested students to write their responses. The guidelines and the questions were developed based on the critical aspects of the research questions and the study's theoretical frameworks. Two experts validated these instruments in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Expert validation was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument.

The data from the interview were transcribed, coded based on the topics generated from the responses, and categorized into themes of the responses to conclude from the overall responses. The analysis results were then checked by expert validation and member checking as a method of triangulation to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative data. The quantitative data from the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The response to each question item was calculated to generate percentages of the number of responses in each question. The responses to open-ended questions in the survey were analyzed in the same way as the responses from the interview, as they were also qualitative in nature.

The interview, the survey, and the action research all together build the case study on the attitude toward and experiences of the respondents about teaching English writing using topics about Islam. This aligns with Gall et al. (2007) in that case studies aim to have an in-depth study of the participants' perspectives and experiences related to a particular phenomenon in their real-life context. Therefore, this case study design fits well with the objectives of the study reported in this article.

## Results

Data from teachers' interviews and students' surveys are presented below based on the three main inquiries of this study: (1) the factors enhancing students' writing skills, (2) factors hindering the students' learning to write in English, and (3) whether topics about Islam better facilitate students' learning to write in English. The data from both techniques of data collection are presented in corroboration to build a more holistic understanding of the investigation.

### *Factors Enhancing Students' English Writing Skills*

The teachers' reflections suggest several factors contributing to the development of students' English writing skills. These include the process-oriented approach, positive feedback, and freedom on topics. The teacher respondents reflected that the process-oriented approach used in the teaching of English writing contributes to the development of students' English writing skills. Both Teachers 6 and 7 agreed that the process approach of writing not only helps students find a solution to their problems in writing but also assists them better in writing. Teacher 6, for example, stated that the "*process approach...brings better results.*" Teacher 7 also confirmed, "*The problems the students encounter [in writing] can be solved with a process-oriented approach.*"

Another factor assisting the enhancement of students' English writing skills is positive feedback. Positive and encouraging feedback can motivate students and become "*the supporting factor in developing the students' skills*" (Teacher 6). Teacher 4 considered this as being "*very fundamental*" while Teacher 2 recognized this as "*the job for a teacher.*" In addition to positive feedback, the teachers also reflected on the freedom to select the topic close to students live as a contributing factor. Teacher 1 stated that with such freedom, "*students will have more to write.*" Such freedom, Teacher 6 stated, will give students' liberation to write based on their interest which will make them "*fluent in developing the topic.*" When they have the interest, Teachers 2 and 4 added, the students will have the motivation to write more. They will also have "*creativity in their writing*" (Teacher 5). Responses to student surveys also confirmed this idea of freedom. As many as 85% of responses highlight students enjoying English writing when they are given freedom of what to write.

Freedom to choose the topic to write about is an accommodation of students' familiarity with the topic which the teachers believe is a contributing factor to the development of

students' English writing skills. Teacher 4 acknowledged that when the students "have background knowledge, it will be easier for them to develop a text." In agreement with Teacher 4, Teacher 1 stated that using students' prior knowledge is the best way to learn English. Such prior knowledge can be provided by using "authentic examples" (Teacher 5).

### *Factors Hindering Students' English Writing Skills*

Reflecting on their experiences teaching English writing, the teachers identified students' mindset, lack of freedom, and knowledge of language components as factors hindering the development of English writing skills. The first factor is the students' mindset that English writing is difficult, leading to their low motivation. Teacher 6, for example, stated that "*some of them say that learning English is difficult.*" Teacher 2 also recognized this student's mindset of English writing being a difficult skill by stating, "*I asked them to self-evaluate their writing and they think 'writing is very difficult.'*" This mindset, then, makes them 'not motivated' (Teacher 2). Teacher 4 further confirmed that if students do not have the willingness to write or "*have the mental block that writing is difficult, that makes them see writing as a difficult skill.*" The above teachers' interview data about the students' mindset that English writing is difficult is confirmed by data from students' surveys. Out of 100 respondents, 51 of them agreed that they felt English writing was difficult. Responses to the open-ended question in the survey also emphasize this difficulty. Thirty-one have a similar typical answer: English writing is "*a challenge.*"

Another hindrance can also be from "*not [having] many opportunities for students to write ...what they like*" (Teacher 1). This then leads to their "difficulty to find ideas to write" (Teacher 3). Such difficulty seems to be rooted in students' lack of reading (Teacher 4) in that "*they do not read...references*" (Teacher 3). Data from students' surveys also highlight this lack of opportunity to choose the topic of their interest. When given an assignment, they find it difficult to write because of the 'unfamiliarity with the topic' (15%). Another problem relates to a lack of knowledge of language components, particularly vocabulary, as reflected by Teachers 3, 4, and 7. This lack of vocabulary is also highlighted in the data from the students' survey, in which 24 of them ticked the option of lack of vocabulary when asked about factors hindering the development of their English writing skills. Among the typical responses to the open-ended question, the students wrote, "*my vocab is very little,*" "*I just less in vocabulary,*" and "*Because of less in vocabulary.*" This lack of vocabulary also makes it difficult for the students to 'transfer the skills from Bahasa Indonesia to English' (63%).

### *Topics about Islam and Facilitation of English Writing Skills*

Data from both teachers' interviews and students' surveys highlight several benefits and drawbacks of using Islamic topics in English writing for students in Islamic colleges. Among the benefits reflected are strengthening the students' identity, better facilitation of learning, enhanced comprehensibility, improvement in the quality of writing, and achievement of Islamic education purposes.

In relation to the use of topics about Islam in English writing, Teacher 1 said that the topics will make the students '*feel like no threat to their identity...so...enhance their ability to write.*' Also, as every Muslim should be the ambassador of Islam, Teacher 1 added, students in Islamic colleges should use English to '*tell about themselves in English...to let other people know about Islam.*' Also, as Islam is part of students' social practice that students know well about, topics about Islam can serve as pre-existing knowledge facilitating the enhancement of English writing skills. Teachers 1, 5, and 7 agreed on this point. Teacher 1 confirmed that

the use of Islamic topics is the best way to learn writing in English. Teacher 5 reflected that the students have better organization of ideas and predicted that it is because of the students' Islamic background, so "*they have good knowledge about the topic.*" Similarly, Teacher 7 stated that this background knowledge serves as *a very good start for writing ...easier.*" The use of Islamic topic is also claimed to enhance comprehensibility. Teacher 4 recalled that given topics about Islam, the students "*comprehended more easily.*"

It was also claimed that when writing about Islamic topics, the student's English writing is also claimed to be better in terms of organization and development of ideas and the variability of the words used. When writing topics about Islam in English, the students "*can write more...more words*" (Teacher 1) and "*it was better and more organized...the development of ideas was very clear...*"(Teacher 5). Teacher 5 confirmed that the students "*write more fluently when using Islamic points of view.*" When writing about Islam, the students were also "*write more fluently...rich in perspectives*", Teacher 6 added. The richness of ideas is also noticed by Teacher 7 in that the student's English writing "*was better...richer in ideas...*"

Another advantage of using Islamic topics mentioned by the teachers is the achievement of Islamic education purposes. Although this benefit may not be directly related to English writing, this benefit can be seen as crucial in the context of Islamic college. Teacher 3 mentioned that the students have two advantages: "*They can improve their English writing then add their Islamic knowledge....*" Teacher 4 added that the integration of Islamic topics in English writing will benefit students for their future careers as teachers in Islamic secondary schools. She stated they "*are expected to teach in Islamic secondary schools...they need to have both knowledges.*" In agreement with these two teachers, Teacher 6 mentioned that in her state, Islamic university has a policy of integration between general and Islamic knowledge. Hence, the use of Islamic topics in English writing "*matches with the objectives of my university,*" she confirmed.

In addition to the aforementioned teachers' reflection on the benefits of using topics about Islam in the teaching and learning of English writing in the English department in Indonesian Islamic colleges, the data from the students' survey also highlights several benefits. When asked about their agreement on using Islamic topics in their English writing, 73% of students ticked the option of either 'strongly agree' or 'agree.' Responses to the question related to whether topics about Islamic religion and issues make them write more easily are evenly divided between 'Yes' (49%) and 'No' (51%). Confidence in Islamic content (62% out of the yes responses) becomes the underlying reason for the positive response. The No response is rooted in the 'un-translatability' of terms about Islam (74%).

In short, confidence, expression of identity, and ease in writing are among the responses the students selected in the survey. Of 100 respondents, 49% responded to the benefits they experience when writing about Islamic topics in English. In the survey, the students may tick all options that apply to them. Details of the responses are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Survey Responses on the Opinion of Islamic Topics Facilitating Students to Write More Easily

Options	No. of Responses (from 49 responses of 'Yes')*	%
More confidence because of familiarity with topics about Islam	31	62%
Ease in expressing their identity	27	54 %
Opportunity to use English to inform non-Muslim people about Islam	19	38%
English vocabulary about Islam helps students write	16	32%
Ease in finding others who know Islam to proofread students' writing	14	28%

\*those who responded 'Yes' to whether the topic of Islam assists the development of their English writing skills

Data from teachers' interviews and students' surveys in combination highlighted the benefits of confidence, reinforcement of the students' identity, better facilitation of learning, and improved comprehensibility of students' English writing when the students were asked to write about Islamic topics in English.

Despite the above benefits, both sets of data from teachers' interviews and students' surveys also highlight several drawbacks, such as low level of interest, difficulty with Islamic terms, and limited English resources about Islam accessible to the students. Teacher 2 anticipated that topics about Islam may potentially bring a low level of interest. He recalled that his students were mainly from Islamic secondary schools. Hence, topics about Islam may no longer be interesting to them. He recollected *'topics about Islam might be interesting for those from public secondary school but maybe not for students who were already from an Islamic education background.'* This teacher's reflection seems to resonate with 11% of responses from students' surveys in that topics about Islam are not challenging for the students.

Another issue with using topics about Islam in English writing for students in Indonesian Islamic colleges is the non-transferability and untranslatability of the Islamic terms. *"There are several terms that students find it difficult to transfer from Islamic terms into English,"* Teacher 3 stated. This opinion agrees with Teacher 1, who reported that *"...very often there are quite specific words..."* The experience reflected by both teachers also resonates with data from the students' survey, which shows that 74% select the option that Islamic terms are not translatable to English. The students also stated that they had no experience writing about Islamic content (44%). Table 2 summarizes the students' responses to their concerns about using Islamic topics in their English writing.



**Table 2** Survey Responses of the Opinion of Islamic Topics Not Helping Students to Write More Easily

Options	No. of Responses (from 51 responses of 'No')*	%
Some vocabulary about Islam is not translatable into English	42	74%
Having no experience writing about Islamic content	25	44%
No challenge in writing about Islamic topics	6	11%
Other		
Lack of English vocabulary about Islam	2	
Lack of information and references about Islamic knowledge and issues in English	2	
Being afraid of giving the wrong statement about Islam	1	

\*those who responded 'No' to whether the topic of Islam assists the development of their English writing skills

The other concern related to the use of topics about Islam in English writing is the scarcity of resources. Although internet-based resources are abundant, Teacher 5 stated that finding a text model about Islamic context in English is a challenge; "it is very difficult...which is suitable for higher education students...*The majority are very deep discussions, or too simple, like for kids.*" This opinion is confirmed by Teachers 1 and 3.

Both teacher-interview data and student-survey data in corroboration highlight the following points. First, the teachers and students reflected that freedom of topic selection and topic familiarity contribute to the development of their English writing skills. Second, students' mindsets that English writing is difficult, lack of freedom in topic selection, and lack of knowledge of language components seem to hinder students from developing their English writing skills. Third, from the teachers' and students' perspectives, topics about Islam can contribute to the development of English writing skills. Such contribution is because when writing about Islam, the students are already familiar with the topics and feel no threat to their identity of being Muslims. Moreover, the use of topics about Islam in students' writing can also be seen as an achievement for educational purposes in Islamic colleges. The students see their writing as an effort to inform global readers about Islam. However, when asked to write topics about Islam in English, data from the teachers and students highlight that the students find challenges in the aspects of intranslatability and transferability of Islamic terms from Arabic into English. This is due to the limited availability of relevant resources about Islam in English.

## Discussion

This study explored the use of Islamic topics in English writing in Indonesian Islamic colleges. In particular, this study highlights the teachers' and students' reflections and experiences on factors contributing to and hindering the development of English writing skills. The study then further explored the teacher's and students' perspectives and experiences on the use of

Islamic topics to enhance writing skills in English departments in Islamic colleges. The study was informed by the notion that any pedagogical decision may bring both the realm of pedagogy and cultural politics (Canagarajah, 1999; Canagarajah, 2006). The study is also based on the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), the socio-cultural perspective (Kramsch, 1993), and the constructivist perspective in language learning (Reyes & Vallone, 2008). The theoretical basis of the study is that topics about Islam may serve as an inseparable part of students' social practice that may become the pre-existing knowledge to facilitate more comprehensible English learning.

Data from the teachers' interviews and students' survey highlight that topic selection and topic familiarity can contribute to better development of students' English academic writing. In this case, topics about Islam being the socio-cultural context familiar to the students can function as comprehensible input in constructing the students' English writing skills. Also, the teachers reflected on the use of Islamic topics to achieve the goal of Islamic education, a reflection confirmed by the responses from the students' survey. The responses to the students' survey highlight students' opinion that writing topics about Islam can be part of introducing Islam to the world. The pedagogical implication of these findings on the benefits of using a topic about Islam is that teachers need to provide more freedom to the students to select topics that they are familiar with when writing in English. Also, as findings suggest, topics about Islam make the student more confident in writing; religious-based topics can become alternatives when providing tasks for students to write in English.

Despite the benefits mentioned above of using topics about Islam to develop students' writing skills, data from the study also put forward some possible flaws in using topics about Islam to develop students' English writing skills. Among the drawbacks, the teachers and students mentioned are the untranslatability of the Arabic terms related to Islam and the limited English resources about Islam. Also, as topics about Islam relate to religion, some students also reflected on their anxiety if they may write the wrong information about their religion. This finding on the flaws of the use of Islamic topics implies that teachers need to be very careful in selecting which topics about Islam to assign to the students. If the topics relate to those common topics related to their daily lives, the students may be less anxious in writing. Given that some topics are debatable by nature, such as those being the debate among the madhab (school of thought and Islamic jurisprudence), they should be avoided. Reflecting on the students' difficulty in finding relevant resources and appropriate vocabulary, teachers expecting to integrate Islamic topics in teaching and learning English writing should provide more resources and possible corpora of English for Islamic studies to help students. Detailed discussions on the findings are presented below.

Among the factors contributing to the development of English writing skills of students in Islamic colleges are process-oriented approach, positive feedback, and freedom on topics. The teachers reflected on the benefits of using an oriented approach. The claim that such an approach facilitates students to write in English better and find a solution to their difficulty while writing seems to echo the idea presented by (Durga & Rao, 2018; Hyland, 2022). Together with other methods and strategies in previous studies (Ahmadi, 2018; Lam et al., 2017; Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2020), the approach can be adopted by other English writing classes in Islamic colleges.

The data also highlight the role of positive feedback and freedom on writing topics as contributing factors to enhancing students' English writing skills. Both interview and survey data agree on this matter. This finding further confirms the role of feedback in English writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Ma, 2020; Ouahidi & Lamkhanter, 2020; Zumbunn et al., 2022).

An interesting finding of the study is that both teachers and students remember that the use of Islamic topics in English writing can facilitate the reinforcement of the Islamic identity of Muslim students in Indonesian Islamic colleges. This is very much related to accommodating socio-cultural backgrounds in pedagogy and resisting linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999). Together with other research (Mahboob, 2009; Khairiah & Nurzannah, 2020), these findings bring insights into the various ways of instilling Islamic values through education.

Despite the above benefits of using Islamic topics, the teachers' and students' responses show the mindset commonly held by Indonesian EFL learners that English writing is difficult. This mindset shows a degree of affective filter (Krashen, 1982). This also confirms the 4,700,000 hits of the keyword 'difficulty in English writing' shown by Google search. When asked about the difficulty in English writing, both teacher and student respondents recollected challenges with limited vocabulary and grammar skills. Along with previous findings by (Almahameed & Alajalein, 2021; Farooq et al., 2012; Ghulamuddin et al., 2021; Navaz, 2021), the current findings maintain that vocabulary and grammar still become crucial aspects to serious attention in teaching and learning English writing regardless of the student's education and socio-cultural background.

In regards to the use of Islamic topics, one drawback identified by both the teacher and student respondents is the untranslatability of Islamic terms into English. This finding is exciting because cultural background knowledge should contribute to second or foreign language learning (Tseng, 2002). Also, as the content is familiar to students, Islamic topics should make writing relatively more straightforward (Reid, 1993 in Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). The findings interestingly show other viewpoints. Students and teachers reflect that some Islamic terms are not translatable. Therefore, using Islamic topics may not always contribute to better English writing. This is reflected in the responses evenly dividing between Islamic topics contributing to better English writing (49%) and not contributing (51%). It can be assumed that in Indonesian Islamic colleges, and probably in Islamic colleges in other countries, it is not only English and Islam that are at play but also Arabic as the other foreign language that also becomes the language of the religion. Hence, using Islamic topics may even add to the complexity of English writing.

## Conclusion

The study reported in the article aims to explore the factors contributing to and hindering the development of English writing skills of the students in Indonesian Islamic colleges and explore whether students' English writing skills could be better enhanced through writing on topics about Islam. The findings inform that a process-oriented approach, positive feedback, and freedom of topics are the main contributing factors to students' English writing development. Meanwhile, the negative mindset and lack of knowledge of language components seem to be the hindering factors.

In regard to the use of topics about Islam in the teaching and learning of English writing, the salient findings suggest that careful consideration should be made in this case. While topics about Islam may boost students' confidence in writing and make them write in English more easily, there are also threats of the untranslatability of Islamic terms into English. This may bring students another anxiety due to the complexity of English, Islam, and Arabic as the language of the religion.

While the study brings insight into the positive values of using topics about Islam to develop students' English writing skills, the study reported here only relies on teachers' and

students' reflections. Although there was also an element of classroom action research, the influence of the use of topics about Islam on students' writing has not been statistically measured. Hence, the empirical evidence from inferential statistics should be collected in further study. Future researchers may conduct either experimental or causal-comparative studies on Islamic topics to develop students' English writing skills. Therefore, in combination with the study reported here, the findings from future research on the topic can be more conclusive regarding the relationship between topics about Islam and students' English writing skills.

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